



**Célia Margarida  
da Silva Ribeiro**

**Representações da violação na ficção feminina  
Africana**

**Representations of Rape in Selected Fiction by  
African Women**



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## resumo

O presente trabalho propõe-se examinar a violação em diferentes textos, nos contextos do Poscolonialismo e Feminismo, nomeadamente nos livros *The Rape of Shavi*, de Buchi Emecheta, *The Rape of Sita*, de Lindsey Collen, e *Changes: A Love Story*, de Ama Ata Aidoo. Embora os três textos analisem o tema em contextos e profundidades diferentes, os três apresentam a violação como uma metáfora para o encontro colonial.

## **abstract**

This Dissertation aims at examining rape in different texts, in the context of Postcolonialism and Feminism, namely in the books *The Rape of Shavi*, By Buchi Emecheta, *The Rape of Sita*, by Lindsey Collen, and *Changes: A Love Story*, by Ama Ata Aidoo. Although these analyse the theme in different contexts and depth, the three offer rape as a metaphor for the colonial encounter.

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# Introduction





The differences of sex roles are a result of different factors which are deeply involved with the foundation of human societies. One of these is clearly associated with biology since women may be mothers and thus a great part of a woman's adult life in traditional societies is spent giving birth and raising children. Women's economic and political activities are consequently constrained by these responsibilities that lead to a general degree of identification between women and domestic life. Women's focus on children and consequently on the house have been responsible for a certain confinement to a restricted group of relationships within the family. Men, on the other hand, are traditionally associated with other roles than those connected to the house and so their relationships usually transcend the limits of the family. All these contribute to a general, however imprecise, association of women with domestic life and of men with public life.

The cultural notion of woman and female is thus often associated with biological characteristics such as maternity and fertility and so women are usually seen as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives. Women are associated with "nature" because of their biological and sexual functions while men are associated with "culture" due to their traditional role outside the house. While sex is a biologically determined fact of nature Eisenstein Hester points out that gender is a "culturally and socially shaped cluster of expectations, attributes and behaviours assigned to that category of human being of the society" (Hester, 1983: 7). Thus in societies where there is a clear differentiation between

the domestic and public domains women's status is usually lower than in those where this distinction is not so strongly perceived.

According to Nancy Chodorow we are not born with the perceptions of gender differences but all the differences concerning the way men and women move within societies are the result of the cyclical development of both boys and girls. In this perspective, girls enter womanhood naturally since they are raised by their mothers and so they are vertically integrated to become their predecessors. On the other hand, boys must learn to become men by themselves, through horizontal relationships. Fathers are usually and traditionally more absent and so boys must unite with their own peers in order to deal with a common anxiety – that of becoming men. Since the process of transforming into men and / or women is usually associated with a process of identification, women become women by following their mothers' footsteps while men become men by proving their masculinity. Boys and men thus deny a feminine identification that might connect them to those feelings associated with women: dependence, relational needs and emotions in general and as boys grow up there seems to be a growing need to clear and maintain these rigid gender boundaries.

Nancy Chodorow argues that gender differentiation is identical to male domination since even though a society could be gendered without being male-dominated such a society has never existed. She reinforces the idea that the cause of this state of things is the separation between the domestic and public spheres (nature versus culture), which starts with women's mothering "that determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and a basis for the structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres." (Chodorow, 1978: 10). The question raised here is that these spheres operate

hierarchically and the public one dominates the domestic sphere and this leads to the subordination of women as a function of a universal public-domestic sphere. The definition of boys, which is made negatively – by the negation of the attributes associated with the feminine - becomes the way through which masculine identity is secured.

Male domination exists when, in a certain organisation or institution and ultimately in a society, men have an unreciprocated authority or control over women. When men have the power to control women's lives and actions, when men occupy institutionalised positions in decision-making roles from which women are excluded, or when men benefit from labour or other work activity more than women, we are facing some of the conditions that characterise a male-dominated society. Male-domination, as said before, is the result of the almost exclusive parenting of children by their mothers that is the key cause of women's subordination and oppression. Bearing this in mind, the sharing of parenthood seems a logical solution for the eliminating or at least diminishing of women's oppression.

Throughout history, women have rarely achieved a dominant role either in the working world or in the political sphere. In *Sexual Politics*, 1970, Kate Millett coined the term *patriarchy* as a shorthand term for the social system based on male domination and female subordination. She argued that in all societies the relationship between men and women has been based on the power of the former over the later. Men's power is so universal that it goes beyond the power based on class or race, to the extent that it almost seems "natural". Men's power is so strongly rooted in people's lives that it is maintained by a natural process, which begins in the family and is reinforced through education, literature and religion, among other conditioning factors. She argued that patriarchal

gender roles were “perhaps even more a habit of mind and a way of life than a political system” (Millett, 1989: 63).

Women’s positioning in society has constantly been at an inferior level and women have even been seen as belonging to men, a male’s property. During the Victorian period, in English-speaking middle-class society, women were seen and expected to be passive, ignorant and emotional and their major concerns were supposed to be concentrated on the home. Women were incapable of benefiting from education and didn’t have any other respectable role than that inside the house where they had to submit to their fathers’ and husbands’ desires. Despite this basic structure there were always several feminists who claimed, such as Mary Wollstonecraft for example, that women should have the same rights as men as far as education, employment, property and the protection of the civil law are concerned. She argued that sentimental novels encouraged women to see themselves as helpless and silly and this idea had to be erased.

Throughout the world and over the centuries there have always been groups of women campaigning, organising and working together in order to improve their lives and in order to achieve a different status within society. Many women in many parts of the world have suffered, fought and won a wide range of goals, which include rights, opportunities and protections. However and in spite of the great advances achieved over the last few decades, there are still significant gender gaps that place women at an inferior level, still having to deal with enormous disadvantages.

In western democracies there is a common belief that women today enjoy more or less the same rights as men, at least legally. It is believed that women

have as much right as men to be educated, to vote and to stand for political office; that women are entitled to work outside the home whether or not they are married; that men and women doing the same work should receive the same pay and that men are not entitled to use violence against their wives. Many also believe that the mothers of young children should be enabled or encouraged to enter paid employment, that women should be better represented in legislative assemblies and that a married woman has a right to refuse sex with her husband (Bryson, 1999: 9).

Even though these beliefs are common and democratic societies do assume equal treatment, it is not necessary to carry out a very detailed analysis to conclude that all of these goals have not yet been achieved. We continue to be, in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo's words, "heirs to a sociological tradition that treats women as essentially uninteresting and irrelevant, and accepts as necessary, natural and hardly problematic the fact that, in every human culture, women are in some way subordinate to men" (Rosaldo, 1974: 17). In fact, one can say that women are still discriminated against because of their gender in almost all, if not all, spheres of society. For example, and according to data given by "Gender Dimensions of Racial Discrimination", (1) about seventy per cent of the world's poorest people are women; of the 960 million illiterate adults two thirds are women, wage disparities and access to the labour force between men and women are common; forced sterilisation and other coercive means of birth control measures are still currently applied, especially in particular racial groups; in no country in the world are women represented in the same numbers as men in decision making positions. Women still retain the basic primary and almost always exclusive responsibility for domestic work as well as the upbringing of children. Women still live in a male dominated world in which

men almost monopolise the decision-making positions regulating, for example, women's access to contraception, abortion, fertility treatments and reproductive choices. We could go even further if we analysed the ways through which women are controlled by fundamentalism or by nationalistic and ethnic conflicts in which women become a very important element both physically and symbolically as reproducers and as sexualised bodies. Nonetheless, despite the fact that this struggle to obtain stable levels of equality hasn't entirely been successful, the results already obtained are, according to Julia Kristeva, "even more important than those of the Industrial Revolution." (Kristeva, 1997: 201). The questioning of the patriarchal world basically seeks the establishment of equal and free from gender roles laws and opportunities in the workplace, in public life, including in the access to artistic creations, regardless of race, class or ethnicity.

When looking back in history we are usually presented with an almost exclusive male literary tradition. In fact, until the end of the nineteenth century women's stories were largely concentrated in stories told by and about men. Artistically as well as politically, according to Carolyn Heilburn, women "have been deprived of the narratives, of the texts, plots, or examples by which they might assume power over – take control of – their lives" (Heilburn, 1988:17). This happens not because women did not write or couldn't get published. Women did write and were successful but they have been edited out of literary tradition especially when referring to the birth of the novel. This happened due to several reasons including a greater institutionalisation of literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as an almost exclusive decision making power concentrated in the hands of men who easily found great works among themselves. According to Dale

Spender, “in a male-dominated society, women are denied the right to their own creative resources and that these resources are taken by men to augment their own” (Spender, 1997: 22). There was a clear dominance of men in literature as there was in society in general. Besides living in this male – centred world, women often saw their creative resources being stolen by men who appropriated their goals and achievements.

There seems to be a non-innocent exclusion of women’s work and even a denial of its existence. In fact, we can go even further since there are several examples, such as that of Eliza Haywood referred to by Walter Allen and Ian Watt, in which women’s works have been appropriated, exploited and stolen from their own rightful owners. However, some women’s voices did eventually manage to be taken seriously. In *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929, Virginia Woolf argues that there is an essential need to demonstrate different views and meanings of the world. She admits that women had many difficulties being taken seriously because they had internalised prejudices that tended to see women’s experience as domestic and interpersonal, focused on daily life. She foresees the need to deduce men’s views in order to provide a wider understanding of the way the world works. Women’s perspectives towards the world had to stop being silenced as they had been during the preceding centuries.

During the mid twentieth century there was an awakening of notions of feminine self-identity and the dependence of women as wife and mother, as the “other” to men, was increasingly criticized. Elaine Showalter and Susan Brownmiller are just some examples of critics who called for an end to the victimization of women by men both in literature and life. Showalter encourages women to reject male cultural violence and the female preoccupation with misogyny and victimisation. There was a new awareness and



an improvement in public laws that, however, were not enough. Together with these there was the need to change men and women's personal attitudes about themselves in order to achieve true equal opportunity. In Jane Flax's opinion "from the perspective of social relations, men and women are both prisoners of gender" (quoted in Rosenberg, 1996: 111). During these decades there was the proliferation of consciousness raising groups in the West which brought together women from different backgrounds, different intellectual abilities and ambitions, all of whom suffered the personal and public effects of patriarchal society. There was in general a greater awareness of the gender constraints and the need to free society from them. These changes continued during the 1970's and 1980's, leading inexorably to a radical revising of the patriarchal (male-dominated) society since female writers were no longer willing to accept women's inferior status to men in family, society and the arts. The personal became political in all aspects of life including work, family, sexuality, racial and ethnic identity and even spirituality. The phrase "the personal is political" is both associated with women's liberation and to assuming certain women's lives as prototypical.

Feminist scholars protested against the systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon. This neglect could take the form of a distortion or a misreading of the few recognised female writers, on the one hand, and the exclusion of other female writers, on the other. When women started to speak increasingly for themselves, writing became a mode of resistance against a patriarchal type of culture. Certain French feminists like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, protested against a conventional psychoanalytic marginalisation of women as the "other", claiming that women's difference from men at all levels (psychic, physical and intellectual) should be celebrated rather than repressed.

Luce Irigaray claims that patriarchal discourse placed women outside representation as absence, negativity, the dark continent, a lesser man. Hélène Cixous postulated the “écriture féminine”, female or feminine writing, that could disrupt the very bases of patriarchal “logos” with its binary oppositions that underlie all the systems of cultural and political repression – the linguistic drive to speak in oppositions like white / black, male / female, in which similarities are suppressed and one term is tacitly preferred over the other. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, 1949, also argues that “Woman thus seems to be the inessential who never goes back to being the essential, to be the absolute Other, without reciprocity. This conviction dear to the male, and every creation myth had expressed it, among others the legend of Genesis, which, through Christianity, has been kept alive in Western civilization” (de Beauvoir, 1977: 173). She claims that there is a hope that socialism would put an end to the oppression of women. Based on the idea that regards woman as man’s other to whom the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions is denied, Simone de Beauvoir realises that these fundamental assumptions dominate all aspects of social, political and cultural life; a total refusal of any notion of female nature or essence is visible in her famous statement “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1977: 295).

Changes in social and cultural structures can’t however be dissociated from linguistic changes. The language we use, the way we speak, write and / or read, indicate attitudes, beliefs and values. In fact, one of the major challenges feminists have been dealing with is connected to the achievement of clear evidence, which proves that there is interaction between language and individual thought and between the social and cultural contexts in which language is used. Every approach to literature then becomes political

since, for the feminist reader, there is no innocent or neutral analysis as far as literature is concerned. Different modes of address, verb and noun forms, among others, are just some of the examples, which prove that most languages are elaborated on a gender-differentiation basis that may also lead to a differentiation of the natural, social and spiritual world. Men's "monopoly over language" is recognised by Dale Spender who considers that "The English language has been literally man made and (...) it is still primarily under male control (...) This monopoly over language is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently have ensured their invisibility or 'other' nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited" (Spender, 1985: 12). Since women's literary tradition has not been consistently explored and studied, many feminists such as Adrienne Rich claim that it is necessary to know well the writings of the past in order, using her words, "not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (Rich, 1995: 35). With the creation of a "female literary tradition" feminists sought not only to construct a new or alternative canon of women's writing but also to create a women's language which would disrupt Western patriarchal language.

As in feminist criticism, early analysis of the female literary tradition tended to homogenize the female experience and not take into account the variety of races, religions, and ethnicities. In the 1960's and 1970's American poets, fiction writers and essayists profoundly changed their sensitivity to the nation's racial and ethnic minorities. There was a growing awareness of different cultural heritages and pride in races and cultures in political action. There was in America, for example, an exploration of African-American life, myths, roots, morality, culture and even sexism. These changes led to the

creation of a new set of images as well as to the rejection of old stereotypes concerning the black woman. After a long period in which racial and ethnic groups experienced brutal discrimination there was an awakening of consciousness and a focus on civil rights and multiculturalism. However, when black women's books were dealt with at all, this was usually done in a context of black literature that largely ignored the implications of sexual politics. One must not forget that a black feminist approach to literature must take into account not only the politics of sex but also the politics of race and class. Black feminist criticism has been increasing due to an increasing recognition that white men, white women and black men consider black women's experience as marginal. So there is the need to assert black women's place, in Mary Helen Washington's words, "black women are searching for a specific language, specific symbols, specific images with which to record their lives" (quoted in McDowell, 1993: 195).

Taking into account all the differences among women, the existence of multiple groups of women who have been fighting in order to improve women's way of life and rights does not always predict a consensual type of relationship among them. The interaction between different groups of women is difficult and sometimes impossible due to the difficulty in recognising different patterns of behaviour. Some feminists argue that unity between women is impossible due to the differences among them. They argue that only by eliminating these differences can solidarity exist and real transformation occur. According to some authors, women of colour have been ignored by feminists and their experiences have been marginalized in the same way male ideologies have marginalized women; for bell hooks black women "were asked to choose between a black movement that primarily served the interests of black male patriarchs and a women's movement

which primarily served the interests of racist white women” (hooks, 1981: 9). Some black feminists have been claiming that white feminist groups have directly exercised power over them. An example of the silencing of blacks and other groups in the feminist canon is the landmark *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963, by Betty Friedan, in which many groups of women including black women were simply ignored. Contrary to the generalised idea that women are weak creatures who need male protection and who have no other place of work than the home, black women’s experience testifies to a history of hard work, resourcefulness and fortitude. In certain African societies women may control a good part of the food supply, accumulate cash, and trade in distant and important markets and still in bell hooks’s opinion, “Few black women have had a choice as to whether or not they will become workers” (hooks, 1981: 82). In fact, even the phrase “African women” does not mean that this is a homogenous category and that the conditions of these women are always the same. Thus Barbara Bush states that black women’s writing reveals the “complexity, depth and diversity of black women’s lives and challenge the generalised stereotypes perpetuated by with culture, and in a different, but equally significant way, by black male culture” (Bush, 1996: 23).

Black feminists want to convey the idea that women’s struggle should not be centred on middle class white women but on all women from working class black women to middle class white women. Thus, only a clear awareness of the experiences of all these women will allow the perception of all forms of oppression which are closely related: gender, race and class and so, according to Sophie Oluwele, “African women’s studies: attempts to document various forms of female oppression both in modern and traditional African societies.” (Oluwele, 1998: 104). In order to achieve some of the major goals

which include the reduction and, if possible, the erasing of gender differentiation, women do not need to share common oppression, common sentiments and feelings, but women need to be “united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity” (hooks, 1997: 500).

Together with gender, Margaret Anderson points out that race is also a social structure “constructed through social interaction and manifested in the institutions of society, interpersonal interactions, and the minds and identities of those living in racially based social orders” (Anderson, 1995: xix). Barbara Smith argues that the “politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers.” (Smith, 1993: 170). In fact, there is a tendency to speak of a double discrimination when referring to women of racial or ethnic groups who are discriminated against based both on gender and on race / ethnicity. The term “double jeopardy” previously introduced by Frances Beale in 1972, was used to describe the dual discriminations of racism and sexism black women suffer from, for “As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men” (quoted in King, 1997: 222). However, to this “double jeopardy” a third element was added – class. Black women’s class oppression became one of the largest component of their subordinate status. Black women not only suffered the same demanding physical labour and brutal punishments as black men, but also other forms of subjugation only applicable to women. Black feminist ideology wants to assert the visibility of black women and to challenge the inter-structure of the oppression of racism, sexism and classism in order to

make visible the image of the black women as powerful and independent. The connection between race, class and gender was also pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir when she compared the male-dominated, traditional women to “Workers, black slaves, colonial natives have also been called grown-up children (...) that meant that they were to accept without argument the verities and the laws laid down for them by other men” (de Beauvoir, 1977: 609). The intersection of race and gender was also noted by Barbara Smith in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” in which the author tries to elucidate the reader about “how both sexual and racial politics are inextricable elements in Black Women’s writing” (Smith, 1993: 174). Even though gender may create a certain bond among women, in many important ways women from diverse racial, ethnic and class backgrounds have had, still have and will have different experiences as victims of a double or even triple oppression – race, class and gender.

Poverty, education, work, health, war and conflict, among others, lead to the discrimination and oppression of women and these oppressions are inseparable and construct, reinforce, and support one another. Thus, the experiences of different groups of women must be related to the context of colonialism, imperialism and nationalistic struggles for independence. During the colonisation process black women were constituted as the “ultimate other” under the white patriarchal and racist culture. The question of representation, the author’s authority, the role of the reader, race, class, gender, history, social inequality, the political vision of the text, racist or non-racist attitudes, the engagement with local realities, all became interlocking factors which must be taken into account when analysing literature. Temporal and spatial relations between the imperial centre and the colonial margins must also be taken into account. The need to

hear “the other voice” beyond the politics of canonicity becomes a prerogative since “colonialism was a project of power and control, of domination and racial exclusiveness that, nevertheless, provided the context in which modern identities were constituted” (Gikandi, 1996:9).

Political scientists and economists first used the term post-colonialism to denote the period after colonialism. However, this term has acquired a wider meaning, especially in the hands of literary critics and others. It is now seen as involving a “studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after – effects of empire” (Quayson, 2000: 2). According to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, 1995, “We use the term ‘post-colonial’, however, to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1994: 2). Therefore, the term also involves discussion of experiences of various kinds, such as those of slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. Homi Bhabha argues that “Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the ‘present’, for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix ‘post’: *postmodernism*, *postcolonialism*, *postfeminism*” (Bhabha, 1995: 1), and so there is a common tendency to add the prefix “post” to a wide range of



areas of knowledge about which there is a new awareness and toward a greater attention is paid. It involves both conflictual and consensual cultural engagements that defy our definitions of tradition and modernity, and our definitions of the private and of the public, among other dichotomies.

Post colonialism draws our attention to a painful period of the past, both an incomplete process of colonisation and the hegemonic pressure that still continues to have the same power and presence. It aims at the analysis of all culture that was and still is affected by the colonisation process. Post-coloniality is then a period of transition and instability in which colonised people sought and still seek to escape their repressive pasts and presents. Post-colonial novels are thus characteristically hybrid, multicultural productions that show the influence of many genres. CLR James has argued that “the ‘postcolonial prerogative’ becomes both a discursive engagement with the postimperial state [Britain] and its ex-colonies and a process of ‘re-interpreting and rewriting the forms and effects of an ‘older’ colonial consciousness from the later experience and the cultural displacement’ that marks the more recent, postwar histories of the western metropolis” (Bhabha, 1995: 174). A post-colonial literary theory thus involves a political writing and reading of the post-colonial world that is deeply engaged with the oppression of the imperial power as well as the resistance to it, whatever form these may take.

According to Gayatri C. Spivak “empire messes with identity” (Spivak, 1993: 226) of both the coloniser and colonised. The first priority of postcolonial theory is to recover the circumstances that produced colonial and postcolonial culture and texts. There is an assumed European superiority visible when coloniser and colonised read stories and narratives. In a modern world where the consciousness of disorder, chaos and anarchy

rule, the African writer found a place in history and time to denounce “on the one hand his nostalgia for the past, with all its imperfections, and on the other hand his bitterly ironic indictments of the present” (Ker, 1997: 1-2). African readers and writers acquired literacy and a willingness to renounce their previous identities and narratives in order to enter an imperial future in which they were still marginal. The belief that superior races had the duty to lead inferior races out of the darkness of savagery into the light of civilisation created an erroneous association of white with light, goodness and civilization and black with darkness, evil and savagery. During the eighteenth century the theory of the “noble savage” and in the nineteenth Spencer’s “survival of the fittest” helped to show the inferiority of other races and was used to justify the ever-expanding British rule under the excuse of biological determinism.

The use of sexual violence to control colonial subjects was a common strategy during the colonial period. In fact, various authors, like Edward Said, Jenny Sharpe and Frantz Fanon, have identified rape as one signifying trope of colonial discourse. In Edward Said’s, *Orientalism*, there is an analogy between rape and the relationship between the West and the East. Against colonial rule, Edward Said often invokes rape as a metaphor to characterise the relationship between the Occident and the Orient, the Occident penetrates the Orient as a rapist penetrates the woman’s body, imposing subjection and submission on the later. On the other hand, Frantz Fanon, for example, argues that the native man raping the colonising woman is the master trope of colonial discourse. Jenny Sharpe, in *Allegories of Empire: the Figure of the Woman in the Colonial Text*, demonstrates that the ideas presented by Frantz Fanon are not necessarily an essential

feature in colonial discourse but something historically produced. She argues that before “The Mutiny” in India in 1857, there were no stories of rape and “a crisis in British authority is managed through the circulation of the violated bodies of English women as a sign for the violation of colonialism” (quoted in Loomba, 2002: 80). Examples of English novels that represent the colonised man as a rapist who violates the British woman can nonetheless easily be found. For example, E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, in which an Indian is wrongly accused of raping a British woman, or Paul Scott’s *The Jewel in the Crown*, which presents rape as a metaphor for imperialism, both reinforce the idea of the colonised rapists instead of the colonial machinery of rape so that the moral value of colonisation is justified.

The raped woman, many times denied a name, a voice, subjectivity and even life becomes a cultural signifier of the politico-social violations of partition, a stand-in for a corrupt nationality. In “Women’s Rights versus Feminism? Postcolonial Perspectives” Harveen Sachdeva Mann presents the female subject of rape in a feminist textual space in various ways:

by representing the raped woman as one who becomes a subject *through* rape rather than merely one subject to its violation; by structuring a post-rape narrative that traces her strategies of survival instead of a rape-centred narrative that privileges chastity and leads inexorably to “trials” to establish it; by locating the raped woman in structures of oppression other than heterosexual “romantic” relationships; by literalizing instead of mystifying the representation of rape; and, finally, by counting the cost of rape for its victims more complex than the extinction of female selfhood in death or silence (Mann, 1995: 76-77).

Few other crimes are surrounded by more misconceptions and false beliefs than rape. Myths about rape can be seen in sources as varied as Biblical teachings, English common law, and the foundations of modern psychology. From these and other sources, the underlying assumption exists that rape is an act of sexual passion and that woman cannot be trusted to tell the truth about rape. Such erroneous beliefs have been carried down through time and can be recognised in present day society's attitudes, rape laws, and legal procedures. Feminist theory, according to Maggie Humm,

Defines rape as an act *and* a social institution which perpetuate patriarchal domination and which are based on violence, rather than specifically as a *crime of* violence (...) It is one of the most insidious forms of social coercion because rape is a constant reminder to all women of their vulnerable condition (...) Currently, feminist theory takes the view that rape is a political act of terror against an oppressed group (Humm, 1995: 234).

Susan Brownmiller, in the classic *Against Our Will*, states that female's fear of rape was probably the original factor of women's subjugation and not a natural tendency to monogamy, motherhood and love. In Roberta Rosenberg's words, "it was Brownmiller who began to discuss rape, discrimination and other acts of violence against women as political oppression, not social deviancy" (Rosenberg, 1996: 238). According to Susan Brownmiller "Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times" (Brownmiller, 1975: 14-15). Women's protection under a rudimentary male-protectorate led both to the imposition of chastity and monogamy and to the solidification of men's power, the so-

called patriarchy. Since women were not independent beings, when rape became a criminal act it couldn't be committed against women and so it became a crime of male against male. For centuries rape was regarded as a crime only insofar as the rape victim was considered the property of a man, either her father or her husband. Rape acquired the meaning of theft. Rape was seen as a violation of male possession. In fact, according to Deborah Cameron in *The Feminist Critique of Language*, "It is relevant to recall that *rape* was originally synonymous with *theft*" (Cameron, 1990: 17), instead of being perceived as an assault on a woman's physical and psychological integrity: "When men discovered that they could rape, they proceeded to do it. Later, much later, under certain circumstances they even came to consider rape a crime." (Brownmiller, 1975: 14).

The punishment for this crime, supposedly committed against men, went through several steps, depending on the place and time one refers to. For example, under Babylonian law if a married woman was raped she was considered culpable and adulterous and would be stoned to death along with her attackers (as still happens in some Muslim societies); under Assyrian law the father of a raped virgin would be allowed to rape the rapist's wife; before the Norman Conquest the penalty for rape in Britain was dismemberment or death; by the time of Edward I, rape was considered just a family misfortune and a threat to land and property since rape became a method of acquiring property given that the rapist had to marry the victim. It is also important to mention that the rape of a woman by her husband was not considered a crime for many centuries.

Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, in *A Natural History of Rape*, 2000, argue that all men are potential rapists under certain circumstances. According to these authors there are biological conditionings that impel men to rape and so men should be trained to

improve their techniques of self-control in order to avoid rape. On the other hand, they even suggest that women should be aware of their vulnerability and at risk situation and should consider the responsibility of being unattractive in order to avoid being desired and raped! This tendency towards rape is supported by the idea that rapists unconsciously want to increase their possibilities of reproduction. However, and even though most men don't rape, it is also true that they do participate in a system that keeps women vulnerable and inferior, perpetuating the image of their supremacy and so while "men's physical ability to rape is a biological fact; the extent to which rape actually occurs and fear of sexual violence restricts women's lives is, however, socially variable." (Bryson, 1999: 47). The anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday has a different opinion: "It is important to understand that violence is socially and not biologically programmed. Rape is not an integral part of male nature, but the means by which men programmed for violence express their social selves. Men who are conditioned to respect the female virtues of growth and the sacredness of life do not violate women" (quoted in Warshaw, 1994: 46 - 47).

Sigmund Freud and his followers coined the ideology that all women want to be raped. Freud first saw rape as something women desired in a 1924 paper entitled "The Economic Problem in Masochism" in which masochism was seen as a condition to sexual excitement, as an expression of the feminine and as a behaviour norm. This ideology evolved and the penis envy all women suffer from, according to Freud, would be the cause for women's envy and sense of "lack". Thus the female is perceived as an absence or negation of the male norm. According to Kate Millet, who rejects Freud's penis envy, sexual politics is the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its

power over the subordinate sex. However, there are several rape supportive myths that are conveyed through the media, and other sources, that include ideas such as: men should take the dominant role in sexual encounters; men don't take "no" for an answer; women never really mean "no", they mean "yes"; women do not want to take the responsibility for their own sexual desires; men cannot control their sexuality; women, under a certain set of circumstances such as too much drinking, dressing provocatively, being in an unsafe place alone, and others, deserve to be raped. These are among many other myths that surround the crime and, to a certain extent, try to justify and make the crime something socially understandable. In fact, the victims of sexual assault, harassment and rape are all ages, all nationalities, races, ethnicities, and both genders. No one asks to be sexually assaulted and people have the right to be safe from sexual violation at anytime, any place, and under any circumstances. Victims are forced, coerced and / or manipulated and offenders should be made responsible for the assaults.

Rape can lead to several responses on the part of the victim. From fear to nightmares, from stress and lack of ability to concentrate, from loss in self confidence to grief and despair, are just some of the both emotional and physical responses of the victim. According to the DeKalb Rape Crisis Centre (2), over ninety per cent of all sexual assaults occur between people of the same race or ethnic background, demystifying the notion of the black rapist and the white woman, and about eighty per cent of all sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows, a friend, an acquaintance, a date or someone from the familial milieu. The reasons given by most rapists are power, domination, revenge and humiliation. Rape is an act of aggression and violence

accomplished through sexual means. Whether the victims fight back or not, when a man forces a woman to have sex, rape has occurred.

Most of the time, rape is a crime of opportunity, when a potential victim and a potential offender are put together a complex process is immediately put in motion. Rape is supposed to follow certain rules according to which the victim may or may not act. However, the problem remains since while “A victim may choose to play by what she assumes are the rules but rapist does not necessarily respond with similar civility” (Brownmiller, 1975: 361). This insidious crime also raises other questions such as, for example, the absence of physical proofs that testify the crime was committed. Since it is a distortion of the primary act of sexual intercourse that joins male and female in mutual consent and it is surrounded by so many myths, sometimes it is difficult to prove to what extent it was a crime or a desired act. Thus, according to Lord Chief Justice Matthew, a famous seventeenth century English jurist, “Rape is an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused, the never innocent” (quoted in Brownmiller, 1975; 369). A sexual assault is an invasion of bodily integrity and a violation of freedom and self-determination wherever it happens. It is an incursion into the private and personal inner spaces without consent. “All rape is an exercise of power” (Brownmiller, 1975: 256), no less. In her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Brownmiller argues that rape is an exercise of power caused by the imbalanced power that exists between most men and women and which is fixed in the minds of both men and women. Even today many men are socialised to be sexually aggressive and many women are socialised and educated to submit to men’s will and this reinforces and strengthens the continuation of the crime.



According to Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815 – 1902), “Society as organised today under the man’s power, is one general rape of womanhood, on the highways, in our jails, prisons, asylums, in our homes, alike in the worlds of fashion and of work.” (quoted in Bryson, 1999: 25). Several decades after one still can’t accurately refer to rape as a crime without considering many conditioning factors both on the side of the victim and on the side of the offender. Rape can occur due to several reasons and it can victimise people in many different ways.

Rape during slavery was not only a crime committed against women but also a crime committed against a people, which aimed at the subjugation of a group of people in order to achieve economic and psychological gain. The institution of slavery was a subjugating tool of both white over black and of male over female. Since slave black women didn’t have any rights, they belonged to their white masters; they had no chance of expressing their opinions and desires or of refusal when referring to all aspects of human life. Forced sexual exploitation was a system that controlled not only black women’s lives but also all the inner aspects of black people’s lives. The reproduction system, for example, was controlled in order to supply slave children who were put to work as soon as possible. The concept of raping a black woman simply did not exist since black women were white men’s belongings and one cannot rape one’s own property. Black men’s place was almost erased since they were not only subordinated but also saw their women being taken by their masters and their own identity menaced. Kenneth M. Stamp considers that “Having to submit to the superior power of their masters, many slaves were aggressive toward each other” (Brownmiller, 1975: 157) and this might be one of the causes that led to a new kind of violence: black men on white women sexual

assault and rape. Some authors claim that black men started to rape white women because they learned this strategy of domination from their previous owners. It is true that even nowadays the myth of the black rapist still exists in many white women's minds. In fact, in America, for example, this myth has even reached the state of a national hysteria. According to bell hooks, Brownmiller perpetuates the belief that the real danger of interracial sexual exploitation in American society is black male rape of white females. In fact, one can't say that the real danger woman, in general, face, is interracial rape.

bell hooks sees rape and sexual violence during slavery as the intersection of two conditioning factors, gender and race, that ended up regulating black women's lives: "While institutionalized sexism was a social system that protected black male sexuality, it [socially] legitimized sexual exploitation of black females. The female slave lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single her out to assault and victimize" (hooks, 1981: 24). Not only then but also today the crime of sexual assault remains surrounded by sexist and racist myths and misconceptions to minimise the seriousness of sexual assault and put the blame on the victim rather than on the offender. bell hooks harshly criticises Susan Brownmiller when she later refers to interracial rape since "she does not inform readers that white men continued to sexually assault black women long after slavery ended and that such rapes were socially sanctioned" (hooks, 1981: 52). In fact and due to the visualisation of black women as promiscuous and as living in sin white on black rape continued.

In *Women, Race and Class*, 1981, Angela Davis also argues that black women suffer a double jeopardy as she underlines that rape becomes a "weapon of domination, a weapon of repression" (quoted in Humm, 1992: 130). In Davis's case, the racial – sexual

oppression she is referring to is clearly represented in the history of rape of black women by white men, enacted as a weapon of political repression. She notes, "If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped" (quoted in King, 1997: 223). Thus, black women not only had to bear with the difficulties being black brought to them but also had to deal with an additional burden caused by the fact of being women.

The devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery and that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years, as seen previously. "Rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault during slavery, domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion, accompany Black women's subordination in intersecting oppressions" (Collins, 2000: 146). Thus, when slavery ended several questions were raised as far as subjugation and freedom are concerned, as Manto states: "Now that we were free, had subjection ceased to exist? Who would be our slaves? When we were colonial subjects, we could dream of freedom, but know that we were free, what would our dreams be? Were we even free?" (quoted in Mann, 1998: 128).

Violence against women (which includes race-based violence, forced pregnancy, sexual abuse, sexual slavery and rape) is often used as a means to strategically undermine the morale of a community. Rape has accompanied wars of religion, revolution, and others. To rape the woman of an enemy group is to express contempt and inflict humiliation upon an opposing group – a way of diluting the "purity" of its stock. Rape becomes a "natural" weapon in racist, ethnic or nationalistic conflict, a way of controlling

and humiliating certain groups of people, as happened in the history of the United States where black women were constantly raped and abused by their white owners. The myth of the heroic rapist strengthens false notions of masculinity and together with pornography is designed to dehumanise women and to make them mere objects of sexual access.

Rape became a way through which a newly won superiority was clearly shown, the ultimate humiliation to defeated nations. Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Rwanda, are only some of the most recent examples in which women have been used as a site of persecution against particular racial or ethnic groups. The female victim is assaulted not only as body but also, and perhaps more importantly, as subject. The raped woman becomes a symbolic cause; she becomes the representation of her social group, the very embodiment of its collective identity. When women are raped, tortured, and murdered during conflict and war – they represent targets of both physical and symbolic violence.

Contrarily to war rape, prison rape is an act of power “within an all-male, authoritarian environment in which the younger, weaker inmate, usually a first offender, is forced to play the role that in the outside is assigned to women.” (Brownmiller, 1975: 258). Prisons become microcosms of society in which the “weaker” role is performed by the newly arrived men who are the equivalent of women in society. Prison rape is, according to some, a crime not so much motivated by a need for sexual release but the manifestation of a need to define masculinity through physical subjugation and force. As rape is traditionally associated with women, men are advised not to report it, probably because this will allow their families and friends to discover about their humiliation.

Another type of rape is police rape and “police rape is special, for it is an abuse of power committed by those whose job is to control such abuses of power” (Brownmiller,

1975: 270). Given that the police are seen as an authoritative force that is symbolically surrounded by the idea of rightness, police rape represents the ultimate Kafkaesque nightmare. When those who represent the law commit a crime upon those who trust and rely on them for protection the victim is even more harshly imprisoned within the limits of his / her own knowledge.

The theme of child abuse and child molestation is another face of this insidious crime. In fact, no other crime raises so much horror and outrage as the crime of rape committed against children. However, this crime is not only committed by a small number of child molesters who apparently suffer from psychological and social malformations but it is also within a wider range of situations frequently disguised and hidden by familiar boundaries. The victims can range from only a few months old to adolescents. This type of rape has been discussed in recent literature especially by and about women. A well-known example would be Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969, which focuses on a personal autobiographical reflection on child abuse within the familiar milieu. However, either within the familiar / social set of relationships or outside of it, child molestation is frequently surrounded by a silence that is difficult to break. Children frequently put into question their own values and beliefs mainly because they are inserted into a patriarchal type of society that has historically placed children's private sexuality as subsidiary to all authoritative figures: adults.

Much like child abuse, that largely occurs among people who know each other, date and acquaintance rape, some argue, is more psychologically damaging. This fact can be understood if one considers that the victims' subsequent ability to trust others and even themselves is seriously shaken. Acquaintance and date rape are as real as the

rapes in which the aggressor is a stranger, they all involve unwanted sex encounters that harshly affect the victims' ways of seeing themselves and the world that surrounds them. The US Department of Justice documents that eight out of ten women recognise the face of their attacker. Most of the time he is a man they trust and this may be a key element that conditions women's movements in all spheres of society: at work, in a restricted group of friends and even at home. Bearing this in mind, rape becomes "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" (Brownmiller, 1975: 15). However, if it is true that most men do not rape it is also true that many rape women psychologically and so rape becomes a crime solely because women are structurally subordinate and / or because men want to dominate women. Gender stratification is in the origins of rape and in the development of rape law. Nowadays we can say that violence against women is widely recognised and seen as a political issue that is finding its voice through several means. Rape crisis centres, recovery rape centres, rape / violence telephone lines, stricter rape laws and literature are some of the means that concentrate attention on the crime, on its reduction, on the condemnation of the attackers and on helping the victims to recover. Rape and other forms of violence become a focus of attention paid not only by feminists but also by society in general since they are clear manifestations of power and subordination that do not correspond to the legitimating of the individual who possesses the free will of choice regardless of the issue we are dealing with, "Violence against women is a central issue in the feminist movement (...) Feminists have struggled with some success to end the representation of battering and rape as a 'private family matter' or as 'errant sexuality' and make clear these are specific sites of gender subordination" (Crenshaw, 1997: 246).

Throughout the last century several changes occurred as far as a gender analysis of literature is concerned, as analysed previously. Not until the twentieth century did feminists start debating widely issues such as rape. Until then the rights of women at work, at home and at politics had deserved more attention and, in sexual terms, prostitution was the leading symbol of male coercion which had drawn feminists' attention. The modern western world is crowded with sexual stories which talk about sexual behaviour, sexual identity, dreams, desires, pains and fantasies. Taking into account the belief that "Literature supposedly, makes us better human beings by providing us access to the intimate details of other people's lives" (Mukeherjee, 1998: 116), it can serve instrumental ends in the quest for better social forms of existence. Since each work of writing can be understood as an interpretation of the world, writing becomes not only an individual phenomenon but also a cultural and social one. Literature, can, in this sense, be understood as something profoundly historical and so all histories of rape, as well as other themes concerning women, are always historically and culturally placed. Through these stories the private and the public domain are put together. Stories become a part of a political process and power is intrinsically omnipresent in the process. In the modern world the sharing of a common traumatic experience through different vehicles has become more common when referring to rape. Surpassing silence, survival therapy and recovery therapy have become a major theme. Rape as forced sex against one's will whether in the form of stranger or date rape, acquaintance or marital rape, war or police rape, and even child rape, have given birth to thousands of rape stories which proliferate in the world

nowadays. One of my intentions with this work is to analyse to what extent rape stories by women, in the context of post colonialism, can represent cultural and social subordination to a “superior” force that undermines the morale of a certain group of women, and people, under a precise set of circumstances. According to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, postcolonial literature is essentially a writing back to the former metropolitan centre and so I will also try to understand the meaning of physical rape in the light of a possible cultural rape.





## Chapter 1

### Buchi Emecheta's *The Rape of Shavi*



Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos in 1944 and has been living in England since 1962. She is one of the most significant Diasporic writers and her fiction has attracted considerable attention and interest, especially her novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979, which focuses on women's situation in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. In many of her novels we can perceive this issue as well as that of black women's struggle to establish an individual identity. Themes such as womanhood, in general, and motherhood, in particular, are widely explored in order to give emphasis to both traditional structures and to modern ones and to demonstrate her concern "equally with the dual issue of i) the biological control of woman whereby sexuality and the ability to bear children are the sole criteria which define womanhood; and ii) the economic control of women within the colonially imposed Capitalist system whereby women are placed at a disadvantage graver than they had faced in pre-colonial economic structures." (Katrak, 1987: 159). The author thus brings to analysis the extent to which Capitalistic ways of life reinforced traditional patterns of women's oppression by showing clear examples in which they were meant to improve women's status but ended up with the opposite result.

Taking into account that until relatively recently little had been written about African women by women, the images of women being those represented by male authors, Buchi Emecheta brings into discussion several issues connected to women's situation before, during and after colonialism through a woman's eye, winning "worldwide recognition (...)

as a chronicler of the diaspora's women's experience" (Jussawalla, 1992: 83). If one considers that Buchi Emecheta denies and fights against stereotypes of women that male writers have written about, one can understand the different ways women are pictured in her novels. In "African Women in Transition in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta", Marie Umeh states that "Formerly, images of African women were drawn exclusively by African men who idealized them in their writings. Their own dimensional, romanticized images of the African woman, primarily as mother, is contrary to that illustrated by Emecheta in her novels" (Umeh, 1980: 190). In fact, one of the author's main themes involves "the effect upon their lives [women's] of westernisation or 'development'" (Frank, 1982: 478), this time through a woman's eye. Buchi Emecheta does not intend to write for a specific audience but to write about the small details of African women living under certain circumstances, "I do occasionally write about wars and the nuclear holocaust but again in such books I turn to write about the life and experiences of women under such conditions" (Emecheta, 1988: 175). The author uses simple language to express simple and ordinary feelings and the use of English as the means to express her feelings and emotions can be justified by the fact this universal language opens doors to a much wider audience even though she acknowledges that "Nigerian literature in English, or Nigerian literature per se, has been dominated by a kind of Western-educated, male establishment, and they have not let either the women writers or those writers who would do something different get ahead" (Jussawalla, 1992: 89). The use of the "bastard tongue", a term coined by Salman Rushdie, can thus be seen as a sort of betrayal but it was also "one of the only ways colonized people could rise economically, socially, and politically under colonialism" (Gairola, 2000). However, one must not forget the fact that when the transition from orality

to written literature was made there was a clear erasing of much of the female presence in literature since the need to write in the colonial language marginalised many women, who weren't greatly educated, out of new imperial imperatives. This situation also placed women at the margin because while "In African oral tradition, women were very visible not only as performers but as producers of knowledge, especially in view of oral literature's didactic relevance, moral(izing) imperatives and pedagogical foundations" (Nnaemeka, 1994), with the introduction of the written register women saw their role diminished both in terms of age and sex due to their lack of education that put their literature as the "inferior, 'inofficial' counterpart to men's literature" (Arndt, 1996: 32).

Even though a great deal of attention has been paid to this author, *The Rape of Shavi* seems to be a notable exception and this novel has been almost forgotten in terms of critical material. This philosophical novel isn't an autobiographical one like most of her fiction and one of the main themes, which has to do with the metaphor of a girl's rape as the rape of a culture, isn't very common for either male or female writers. In *The Rape of Shavi*, physical abuse as well as motherhood and the role of women are used in order to approach other themes besides women's individuality.

The ambiguity of the title is deliberate and suggests an approach to both female rape, since the name Shavi is a woman's name, and cultural rape, which will be clarified after reading the first pages of the novel. The title, *The Rape of Shavi*, manifests a "controlled defiance" (Allan, 1996: 217) since it centralises rape as the rape of nation and the same event gives birth to a set of interpretations as if it was an object reflected in several mirrors, each one showing a different image and generating different levels of involvement.

*The Rape of Shavi* turns out to be a dystopian fantasy set somewhere in an imaginary country on the edge of the Sahara, maybe in a post-nuclear future. A group of pacifist Europeans, fearing a nuclear explosion, fly out of their country but their plane crashes in this imaginary kingdom which almost immediately presents itself as a peaceful and flourishing community. In Shavi decisions are taken in a communal way in spite of the existence of a King (King Patayon), of a council of elders and of the important position of priests and priestesses, because everyone has access to the King and even children can freely express their opinion towards certain issues. As in many other African countries, in Nigeria seniority gives one of the most important roles in the decision making process and in the conceptualising of moral modes of action as well, "Most Igbo communities did not have kings and so traditional morality was formulated and enforced by elders, priests, priestesses, wealthy and titled men of integrity, articulate and respected members of the society, age-grade groups, association of daughters and association of wives" (Ezeigbo, 1996: 7). On several occasions it is possible to link recent Nigerian history to the Kingdom of Shavi and one of those is here since the presence of the well-known and powerful "council of elders", that together with King Patayon and his priests and priestesses ruled the free kingdom of Shavi, echoes the councils of elders in Nigerian villages.

The first chapter, "The bird of fire", in which a plane carrying the European citizens lands in Shavi, is followed by "The Leper creatures" in which the reader is faced with the Shavians' decision of whether to help or not those "figures that looked very much like human beings" (Emecheta, 1985: 11). At this point it seems interesting to compare the two perspectives that surround the colonial encounter. Traditional images of the African people are usually associated with barbarity, ignorance, primitiveness, and not innocence

and simplicity, and so “Many European novels on Africa underscored the colonialist notion that Africa lacked culture, history and literature and that Africans were inferior to Europeans.” (Arndt, 1996: 30). Examples of this kind of text are easily found, for example: Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, 1902, Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa*, 1938, Joyce Cary’s *Mr. Johnson*, 1949, among others. Here Buchi Emecheta tries to do what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin designated as a writing back to the imperial centre, “the empire needs to write back to a centre” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1994: 6). The Eurocentric view of Africans was inherently discriminating and devaluated the richness of difference. This situation led many African writers to start an intertextual dialogue with their Western counterparts that gave birth to a series of works that try to demystify false images of Africa and Africans. Some of these works, often very different, such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, 1958, André Brink’s *The First Life of Adamastor*, 1993, and, to a certain extent, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Rape of Shavi*, among many others, try to project another image of both the colonial encounter and of the cruel reality of colonialism in the same text. There is a presentation of the other side of the same reality, the way native people saw and felt the intrusion, portrayed by the Europeans, and a truer picture of African cultures and peoples. By doing this, Buchi Emecheta “reverses the paradigm of racial and cultural otherness, ascribing the disadvantage of difference to the colonial rather than the native” (Allan, 1996: 219), and thus the European assume the role of the “other” as they represent the “antithesis of Shavian culture and humanity” (Allan, 1996: 220). These considerations help the reader to understand the difficulty the Shavians had in asserting the visitors’ humanity since their cultural differences and alterity are treated satirically and announce a tragic ending.



The arrival of “the bird of fire” made the Palanese wary. The plane that crashes in Shavi is seen as a “bird of fire” and this aspect is very important since, according to Anoku, the chief priest of Shavi, “their arrival was symbolic” (Emecheta, 1985: 38) and it is said that it may have serious implications in the Shavian community. Their goddess Ogene bubbles blood instead of water and this is a sign which might represent destruction and calamity. Besides, the image of a bird is immediately associated with sacrifice since the sacrifice of birds was a common practice in Shavi either to thank or to ask their goddess Ogene for something. The smell of “burning flesh” together with the sound of “wild things when provoked” (Emecheta, 1985: 11) denounces both the “wounding of European dignity” (Allan, 1996: 220) and presents a rather different image of the colonial encounter described, for example, in *Things Fall Apart*. This “bird of fire”, according to Judie Newman, can be seen as the clash between the neo-Tarzanists and their critics. Neo-Tarzanism is a term that was coined by Wole Soyinka and that characterizes the “poetics of pseudo-tradition, responding to three African literary critics who rejected European universalism” (Newman, 1995) and this puts into open discussion both traditionalism and modernity in both literary and politicized terms as the critics of neo-Tarzanism “argued a decolonisation of African literature, denouncing the standards used to evaluate contemporary African literature as Eurocentric and inappropriate” (Newman, 1995).

The free kingdom of Shavi is the result of a previous history of enslavement which is remembered through the third chapter, “The Song of Freedom”, just after the arrival of those strange creatures that “looked very much like human beings” (Emecheta, 1985: 11). The Shavians are confronted with a very difficult decision of whether to help the strange

visitors. On the one hand the “albinos” seemed human but on the other hand their goddess Ogene who has the purpose of testing their ability to deal with the difference could have sent them. Besides this, they could also be “refugees from slavery” (Emecheta, 1985: 13), like their ancestors, and this, again, calls the readers’ attention to the Shavians’ history. The issues at stake in the chapter “The Song of Freedom” are thus essential to the understanding of the Shavians’ way of life. The Shavians were the offspring of an oppressed people who had lived somewhere in a place called Ogbe Asaba and who had been slaves. We can acknowledge their attempts to free themselves and their subsequent restarting in an unknown place coping with something that sometimes is difficult to deal with – freedom (especially if one has never enjoyed it) and the reader is presented with the history of Shavi from slavery to present freedom. This brief but clear explanation of the Shavians’ history is very important because on the one hand it leads us to understand some of the reasons why they accepted these strange creatures that could possibly have no souls and be a menace to their way of life and, on the other hand, taking into account their symbolic arrival, it almost predicts that the removal from isolationism may be dangerous and permit no return. After coming in contact with the Shavians’ history the reader is clarified on who the leper creatures are, where they came from and why they crashed in Shavi. Chapter four, “The Visitors”, is strategically placed immediately after the Shavians’ history and this conveys the notion of “hybridity” between the two cultures. There seems to be an attempt to suggest the notion of hybridity and of cultural allegiance that mark the “possibilities inherent in post-colonial discourse to escape the simplicity of the binary opposition and to generate a new, powerful and creative synthesis of disparate and contradictory elements – a synthesis that embraces difference as a sign of possibility,

not as a marker of closure” (Newman, 1995). Even though “the Europeans are enculturated into Shavian society and, by implication, humanized” (Allan, 1996: 220), in the end, one will come to the conclusion that the notion of hybridity is reduced to the mixture of chapters.

In fact, if one analyses the sequence of chapters one comes to the conclusion that, most of the time, chapter titles alternate between one and the other reality (Shavian and European). According to Judie Newman “Chapter titles alternate between the two cultures” (Newman, 1995) because two different cultures are put together, different ways of life give birth to different ways of thinking and acting and this leads to a clear culture clash. This strategy may have also been used in order to counterbalance the two opposite sides of the story and make the reader aware of both the positive and negative aspects of each culture. However, the sequence of chapters does not always follow this pattern, for sometimes there are two chapters about Shavi and two about the unexpected visitors.

Buchi Emecheta considers that:

the main themes of my novels are African society and family; the historical, social and political life in Africa as seen by a woman through events. I always try to show that the African male is oppressed and he too oppresses the African woman (...)

I have not committed myself to the cause of African women only. I write about Africa as a whole (quoted in Bruner, 1985: 11)

In fact, in pre-colonial Nigeria women were seen as having a complementary position to that of men. As in the majority of societies throughout the world and throughout time, in the period that preceded colonialism men were believed to be superior and thus, to a

certain extent, they controlled women's lives. Even though "Women in African fiction are defined primarily by their social, economic and biological role, and these roles are defined by men" (Zysshe, 1998), before colonialism in Nigeria Igbo women were nonetheless more than mothers and child-bearers. Women played an active part in the life of the community and were recognised by their labour and trading skills that together with the ability to reproduce constituted the image of women: "there are structures and institutions in these [traditional] societies that empower women and enhance their participation in the socio-political, economic and spiritual activities in the community" (Ezeigbo, 1996: 6). However, women's role became reduced because traditional sexist structures within African society, in general, and Igbo society, in particular, were reinforced by western ideals, "Although gender oppression in the form of domestic and societal patriarchy did exist in pre-colonial Sub-Sahara Africa, women encountered increased and intensified forms of oppression with the introduction of European colonialism" (Gairola, 2000). Thus, colonization brought a new notion of gender which strengthened inequality and gender differentiation; the idea that women belonged in the family and were solely responsible for the raising of the children was one of them. Marie Umeh states that:

Sociocultural attitudes toward women are largely negative, positing that woman is basically inferior to man. Exceptions to this belief of the female as the "second sex" are reserved to those mythical figures such as divinities, earth goddesses, water spirits, priestesses, rain-queens and so forth. [...] Igbo society, like most patriarchal societies, limits a woman's scope and talent by restricting her to male-dominance and domestic spaces. According to her [Buchi Emecheta], particularly weighted against the

Igbo woman are entrenched traditional customs that marginalize woman as “other”.

(Umeh, 1996: 1)

In *The Rape of Shavi* one can perceive both the image of women as hard workers and responsible for the community's wealth, for even the future Queen of Shavi would wash, sweep and cause confusion about her social status “Tell me, are you a slave or simply a serving maid?” (Emecheta, 1985: 41), and another image connected with mythology and supernatural forces. In African societies witchcraft is usually associated with women and its power represents danger to men. In *The Rape of Shavi*, Ogene, the river goddess, is an example of female power and importance in the pre-colonial Nigerian analogy that Shavi provides. The regarding of women as potential danger to men is visible, for example, when in the opening scene the landing of a “mysterious bird of fire” (Emecheta, 1985: 9) and its possible tragic and catastrophic consequences are associated with a woman's (Shoshovi's) revenge. This “bird”, taking into account the timing of its arrival, can be a sign of a female revenge since Shoshovi, one of the King's wives, had been publicly humiliated, for King Patayon didn't inform her that he was about to marry his ninth wife, and Ogene was suspected to be “always sided with the women” (Emecheta, 1985: 12). Besides, this situation allows us to perceive the importance and prestige women had in the Shavian community for it presents Shoshovi openly showing her grief, indignation and integrity and, at the same time, it also shows King Patayon's anger at being put in such a humiliating situation in front of the council of elders, “Now everybody in Shavi was going to suffer, simply because of a stupid cow and a woman's jealousy” (Emecheta, 1985: 12).

In the chapter “Song of Freedom” we can also understand the reason why their goddess is a river. When the Shavians got to a place where the land was flat and the wind was dry they found the river Ogene (and its lakes) and decided to sacrifice birds instead of people, in order to thank it for the blessing of the water. Making sacrifices and offerings are common practices in Africa and through them people mark “the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet” (Mbiti, 1991: 63). Sacrifices usually involve the shedding of blood, justifying Anoku’s worries, at the time of the Europeans’ arrival, when realizing that Ogene was bubbling blood, which can be that of human beings (as in Ogbe Asaba) or that of animals or birds (as in Shavi). There are several circumstances in which sacrifices may be portrayed: drought (common in Shavi), epidemics, war and calamity, among others. People usually make sacrifices and offerings (not clearly evidenced in *The Rape of Shavi*) at sacred groves and holy places such as hills, mountains, lakes, rivers (Ogene) and so on, in order to draw a “god’s” attention to their needs.

Asogba, King Patayon’s son, from the first minute the plane crashes, feels curious and anxious to help and to find out more about those people. It is interesting to analyse what really made him act against his father’s opinion. King Patayon was afraid and he didn’t want his son to take risks but as soon as Asogba hears “the cry of a mother” (Emecheta, 1985: 15) nothing and no one was able to avoid his impetus to help at a time when unimaginable consequences weren’t considered. Maybe influenced by the impact and importance of one of her previous novels *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta includes the role of mothers in *The Rape of Shavi*. Motherhood is given a decisive role in two major circumstances that may not be noticed by the common reader. One is when

Asogba recognizes the albinos as human as he perceives the presence of a mother: “He faced his father squarely. ‘That is the cry of a mother. Look she’s carrying her little one, and I think the child is dead or dying. I must go and see if they need our help. We must talk about their humanity later’” (Emecheta, 1985: 15); the other is when Flip (one of the white visitors) changes his attitude towards nuclear development when he perceives a determined mother carrying and putting her child’s health at risk in the middle of a demonstration in front of the Nuclear Research Institute where Flip worked: “This encounter with a determined mother prepared to risk her child had made Flip rethink his position” (Emecheta, 1985: 62). Even though Buchi Emecheta “not only destroys myths about women’s contentment with the status quo but also gives fresh insights into women’s struggle under male domination and women’s ability to map out strategies that enabled them to survive the patriarchal society that was structured to dominate and oppress them” (Ezeigbo, 1996: 6), the placing of women at these decisive turning points supports Nancy Topping Bazin’s statement: “feminists are not against biological motherhood but they are against what Rich describes as the patriarchal use of motherhood to keep women relatively powerless (Bazin, 1996: 142). As analysed previously, Buchi Emecheta’s main themes are centred on motherhood and consequently women’s issues in general. She has been labelled as a feminist even though she asserts that “I did not know that by doing so [chronicling the little happenings in the lives of African women] I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am a feminist with a small f” (Emecheta, 1988: 175). Being a committed writer, Buchi Emecheta both wants to reflect upon victimization and oppression as a whole, proving that women’s texts are not restricted to determined

subjects, as well as demonstrating the difficulty of being a woman especially if one is born black.

As seen above, the discussion on the leper creatures doesn't end before Asogba's decision to help the foreigners. For the Shavians the decision of whether these creatures were human or not seemed very important and this puts into open discussion, besides the aspects already mentioned, the theme of racism and conservatism evidenced by Anoku and Asogba's interest and curiosity which were, after the presentation of several arguments, reinforced by King Patayon's words: "We are people who give the best to visitors. We cannot start changing that now" (Emecheta, 1985: 37). Anoku, the calculating, materialistic and insincere but also very powerful priest of Shavi, had, in the past, created a scheme which allowed him both to reinforce his reputation as a priest and to improve his finances. When Anoku's wife, Siegbo, was pregnant Anoku immediately thought that his son would be a priest like himself for this would guarantee the family's prosperity and status. However, afraid of not having a son when his wife went into labour he ran to Ogene and prayed. On hearing a woman shouting it was a girl he immediately went to King Patayon's palace and told him that Ogene had told him that "the daughter of the priest would be the future Queen Mother" (Emecheta, 1985: 45). This is probably the funniest but also the most tragic decision Anoku took. It is funny in the way it reveals Anoku's materialistic character and in the way he pretended he didn't know he had had a daughter. On the other hand it is also tragic because it is going to lead to Anoku's death of shame after his daughter Ayoko's rape and Asogba's departure with the albino people because Ayoko hadn't become the Queen Mother as Ogene had told him. By this description of events one might be led to perceive a critical view of religion and creed but



especially a disguised critique of the importance of having a son in traditional African cultures. In fact, although their roles as mothers were essential, motherhood was almost the sole criteria that defined womanhood, leading to “the stigma of unnaturalness ascribed to childless women” (Katrak, 1987: 170). This situation seems to reflect the fact that “Emecheta’s treatment of sexual politics in her society is grounded in Igbo women’s protest against retrogressive cultural norms, such as clitoridectomy, women as baby-machines, the prioritising of boys at the expense of girls, and widow inheritance.” (Umeh, 1996: xxxv). However, the Shavian council wasn’t easily convinced by Anoku’s racist rhetoric following the King’s words and the albino people ended up being welcomed, also due to Asogba’s insistence, and the decision of whether they were human or not, if the albino had been sent by their goddess Ogene or by the devil, was never established.

From almost the first moment Ronje, one of the albino people, sees Ayoko (Anoku’s daughter and the future Queen of Shavi who was betrothed to Asogba from the day she was born) there are some clues that predict something tragic is going to happen. Ronje saw the Shavians as savages and Ayoko’s kindness is seen, through Ronje’s western perspective, as a provocation to sexual intercourse. Taking into account Ronje’s character, nervous, unpredictable, violent and a troublemaker ready to use his gun whenever needed, the reader sees him as an element that might be determinant to the sequence of events. The way Ronje tries to excuse himself for something he intends to do - for example he believed black people were expected to behave badly, to perform poorly at school, to behave disruptively, among others - is very interesting and leads us to think about the nature of rape and racism as well.

According to Coote and Gill, “A raped woman is always somehow to blame for her assault: her skirt is too short, she was alone in the pub, has had two abortions, or really wanted it in the first place” (Oakley, 1981: 261). Did Ayoko really want it? Was she alone near the river on purpose? Is she the one to blame? Ayoko is the product of her society in which kindness, solidarity, dignity, freedom, hospitality and peace rule. Rape was something that had never taken place in Shavi. There people didn’t use physical means of persuasion, and moreover Ayoko could never imagine that men could enter women who hadn’t been subjected to clitoridectomy. All these factors make Ayoko innocent. Ayoko’s innocence is, to some extent, reinforced when she, fearing the consequences of the truth, if the King found out one of the albinos had raped her, releases Ronje, taking serious risks and showing her compassionate and kind character.

Rape also occurs due to Eurocentric preconceptions that involve the right and duty Western people have to impose their culture on those cultures that are considered, by them, as being inferior. Ronje believes this idea, the idea that the Europeans have the duty “to impose their culture on whoever they came in contact with” (Emecheta, 1985: 106). As he can’t do it his “only compensation” (Emecheta, 1985: 106) is Ayoko. He sees her as an oppressed victim and forgets she enjoys perhaps one of the highest statuses in Shavi – she is the future Queen Mother. The way the entire rape scene is presented, including previous and subsequent thoughts Ronje has, clarifies and reinforces Ronje’s crime. It also clearly separates western and African cultures accentuating the different perspectives and modes of action between the two. Ronje sees Ayoko as an object and “a decision arose to possess her” (Emecheta, 1985: 92) while when she sees him she immediately covers her body but it is too late because in Ronje’s opinion, “*Black* people

have no moral standards “(Emecheta, 1985: 93) and this makes him think that she really wants him. He rapes her using violence and as he takes “the future Queen of Shavi” (Emecheta, 1985: 94) he fulfils his revenge on Shona – his white South African ex-wife who abandoned him to go with a black man. Ronje hated black people, Ayoko awakened his rage and so she became the means through which he could fulfil his innermost instincts of vengeance.

The rape of Ayoko became the metaphor for the beginning of the despoilment of an entire culture. As Flip (Ronje’s friend) had warned him “Ayoko is the symbolic Mother of Shavi. If you rape her, you rape Shavi” (Emecheta, 1985: 104). Flip seemed to know something bad had happened but Ronje pretends he wants to civilise Ayoko and marry her. Ronje’s desire to civilize Ayoko can be analysed from two different perspectives: Ronje was either reinforcing his racist attitude towards black people or he was afraid of the consequences of his actions, or maybe both. Flip becomes angry because he felt the western influence could damage the Shavians’ traditional way of life and values, “I don’t want us to introduce our corrupt ways to this people” (Emecheta, 1985: 104). At this point Flip makes us remember Rousseau’s idea of the noble savage. The perspectives of the colonisers and the colonised contrast and the question of to what extent some cultures might impose themselves on others is raised. Is Shavi an antithesis of Western civilisation? It seems that Rousseau’s idea that we are born good and that society corrupts lies underneath Flip’s statement. Flip is aware that western culture when compared to Shavian culture is corrupt and that of course they don’t have the right to “rape” that “chosen race” (Emecheta, 1985: 105). Whether the Shavians were a “chosen race” isn’t the main question but their uniqueness is. As in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall*

*Apart*, Emecheta makes the reader move towards the awareness of the plot as a linear cause / effect narrative. Things are presented to the reader in order to articulate a didactic message. The basic position is that the Shavians had their own traditions, costumes, culture and ideals and the outsiders didn't have the right to disrupt them. The physical rape of a girl became the first step towards the beginning of another wider and more ambivalent rape: the rape of an entire culture, "It is significant that the corruption (rape) by Western values in Shavi is layered within the story of a village girl who is raped by one of the Westerners who have invaded her village" (Holloway, 1992: 32).

Throughout the last chapters we come to the conclusion that the private sexual act led to the destruction of the royal family itself and the word "rape" gradually acquires a broader meaning. First, Ayoko wasn't a virgin anymore for she had been penetrated before she was subjected to clitoridectomy and this demystified the traditional belief that men couldn't enter women without that practice. Second, Ayoko couldn't marry Asogba because she had been polluted and as a consequence she contracted syphilis, which came to be a synonym of civilization, since the "civilized" Europeans through the hands of Ronje brought it. Thus, the completely unpredictable situation that led to this series of events ended up with the sudden departure of the albinos who were conscious that almost anything could happen since they were aware of the consequences of such a tragic progression of events towards cultural collapse.

Asogba's decision to welcome the visitors was decisive since it created the conditions for both Ayoko's rape and for the rape of his entire community as well. At the time of the arrival, Asogba feels curious about the origins of the strange creatures and about the motive that brought them there. Asogba, by putting the King, the council of

elders and the value of priests and priestesses in question, when the decision to help the visitors was about to be taken, marks a turning point in Shavi since he questions the authority of these structures by showing open disagreement and by almost disobeying the established rules. In fact, he became the host to the Europeans but as time went by his curiosity and desire to know the European civilisation grew and, against the westerners' will and that of the Shavians', he went with them to England immediately after the incident which enabled him to marry the future Queen of Shavi. This was perhaps the most important decision that led to the real rape of the Shavian culture. Asogba's hunger for knowledge about different people and cultures ironically ends up playing an important role in the rape of Shavi.

By placing Asogba in England, Buchi Emecheta manages to cover the issue of immigration, especially black immigration, through a clearly poignant perspective. As in the majority of her novels, Buchi Emecheta presents "characters who move from Nigeria to England" (Werlock, 2000: 16), like herself but this time introducing a novelty: it is a man who makes the trip. Much alike the way black people were received in England, "When they arrived in England, black families found themselves viewed as a 'marginalized and victimized minority'" (Werlock, 2000: 16), Asogba had to go through the same type of difficulties by being marginalized, discriminated against in terms of race and class, humiliated and abused. This fact may be reminiscent of both what black immigrants in the 50's and 60's had to go through in Britain where they were offered menial jobs whatever their qualifications, and, at the same time, the experience in Shavi's response that also included work devaluation, seen in Flip's statement " This is reverse discrimination. Here they think we whites are good for only menial jobs" (Emecheta, 1985: 87), as well as

discrimination and cultural mocking, seen in the way the Europeans' habits and customs are criticized, "One of the men offered to take the child from her, but she refused and wailed all the more. This puzzled Asogba. Perhaps they weren't human after all. For why should one human wish to monopolise her sorrow, or even her child? People shared sorrow in Shavi, and any child is the child of the community" (Emecheta, 1985: 34).

The encounter of the two cultures, this time in England, reveals a clear clash between the way the white people received Asogba in Britain and its dramatically opposed equivalent in Shavi. This changed Asogba since he was able to taste and experience the corrupt western ways in the way the English oppressed their visitors. In fact, even though the Shavians showed reluctance in accepting these immigrants, when they decided to receive them they did it the best way possible, as Flip declares "they want us to be fully accepted. We put most visitors to our country in ghettos, but these people want us to mix with them" (Emecheta, 1985: 75). When Asogba returns to Shavi he had decided to make Shavi great and this may be regarded as a way of demonstrating "the changes that colonialism brought to traditional societies and the effects these changes brought upon the lives of African people" (Zysshe, 1998). Asogba was dehumanised, and this is contrasted with the humanisation of the Europeans in Shavi, and he forgot the way things worked in Shavi. He started ruling without his father's permission and he ignored everything that had been taught to him in Shavi. Asogba's hunger for power was the result of his recent "civilization" and this made him want to put a final mark to the traditional values that ruled both Shavi itself and especially Shavi's relationship with its neighbour communities, who saw the Shavians as a withdrawn people. "Civilization", as Ngugi wa Thiong'o states, is a really "complex phenomenon with different meanings and

connotations for different nations and classes. Broadly it refers to a state of bringing nature under human control, creating nurture out of nature.” (Thiong’o, 1997: 154). Bearing this concept in mind one can understand Asogba’s attempts to civilize as a step towards one of the humankind’s main struggles: the struggle against other humans. He rapes Shavi because he tries to change their traditions; he tries to change their minds at the same time as he tries to dominate the peoples around Shavi.

At this point it seems important to point out the clash between the older people, represented by King Patayon, the “Slow One”, who believe “shame killed faster than disease” (Emecheta, 1985: 4), (remember Anoku, who died of shame after Ayoko’s strange disease which didn’t allow her to become the Queen Mother of Shavi as he had predicted), and the younger generations, personified by Asogba’s fascination with power and his imminent interest in showing it to other communities, so they would know the Shavians were alive and that they are strong. Shavi, through Asogba and Mendoza’s hands, and England start exchanging the crystals Flip had discovered in Shavi, which was decisive for Asogba, for food, arms, medicine and other goods. Asogba’s desire is to show his power through militarism, through causing jealousy, through conquests, through taking slaves, through killing and destruction. This aspect reminds us of another aspect in recent Nigeria’s history: the adoption of militarism. Asogba, inspired by some European countries’ history and with Mendoza’s help, adopts militarization as a way of controlling and expanding Shavi’s influence in the region. The traditional Shavian values were disrupted both through Ayoko’s rape and through a total dependence on the British who started to command and rule an entire community, “By locking in the fate of Shavi with Ayoko’s sexual fate, Emecheta underscores the interdependence of colonial and

patriarchal economies” (Allan, 1996: 219) and thus the violation of female sexual freedom becomes the equivalent to the humiliation and rape of a dynasty that was portrayed in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. However, everything ends due to two reasons: Asogba and his men were caught in an ambush, betrayed by the Koo people, and as only six men, Asogba and his brother Viyon, survived, they had to return to Shavi. Second, when they arrived in Shavi they only saw desolation, almost everything was destroyed and almost everyone had died of hunger due to a harsh drought. After seeing that almost everyone had died of hunger Asogba understood that everything that had happened to Shavi was his fault. He had been the one who told people to do nothing because food would arrive in the “birds” that frequently landed in Shavi.

Asogba understood he had to try to fix things. But could things return to what they had once been? Would Asogba be able to restore the old ideals that had been raped by he himself? Would Asogba be able to make the Shavians forget that civilisation meant syphilisation? The forces of modernity destroyed Shavi as King Patayon had predicted from the moment the albinos arrived, “Things will never be the same again” (Emecheta, 1985: 11). Asogba had the duty to “find a place for the New Shavi” (Emecheta, 1985: 177). Egbongbele (the King’s best friend) who understood the dangers the Shavians were taking and who soon realised “how power corrupts” (Emecheta, 1985: 154), and Shoshovi, who became the survivors’ mentor, encouraging his son not to allow Shavi to be raped again, thus assume a determinant role in the growing awareness of the Shavians’ situation and in the search for new possibilities as well. What would happen to the free kingdom of Shavi? Shavi was left without an heir since Asogba and his wives died of syphilis without having children so its future was menaced. The kingdom of Shavi



was left in the hands of Viyon who took the rape of Shavi as a lesson from Ogene to the Shavians. Modernity and civilisation weren't welcomed in Shavi anymore, so its inhabitants had to try to keep their way of living and their traditions and had to avoid following foreign dreams and temptations. There was a final retreat from hybridism, in spite of its richness, and a move towards a new isolationism which would allow the Shavians to maintain their natural stability since they had seen enough of western civilisation and another rape shouldn't be allowed to take place. This retreat seems, however, a no-way out strategy since "The technological and economic changes they [the whites] provoke leave the African nation much worse off than before. A return to past traditionalism for either group, however, is not satisfactory either" (Bruner, 1985: 11).

Ayoko's rape also ironically creates the conditions for women to show their power and "to rise above most of the structures imposed upon them by their male-dominated community through exercising collective power as daughters wives and members of their aged-groups" (Ezeigbo, 1996: 22), in this case just as a group of women. Buchi Emecheta tries to demonstrate that women in Shavi possess a great ability to resist adversity, to decide what is the best to do in difficult circumstances and to survive showing women's determination and non acceptance of the state of things, as written by Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo "Emecheta does not only explore the negative impact of traditional culture and the imposition of colonialism on women, but she also shows how women have reacted and fought oppression, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing" (Ezeigbo, 1996: 22). Apart from occasional incidents, in *The Rape of Shavi*, women are able to defend themselves but the most striking incident in which women show their ability to overcome problems and decide what to do is their attitude towards Ayoko's rape. After what

happened, Ayoko's mother, Siegbo, along with other women, immediately realise that to decide what to do is "a case beyond men" (Emecheta, 1985: 96). Siegbo, as well as other women, seems to understand and forgive men for some of their wrong decisions. Women admit and accept men's rules but the rape of Ayoko was something that could and, in fact, would affect the whole stability of Shavi, as discussed previously, and they couldn't leave this issue in men's hands. According to some feminist theories rape is "a constant reminder to all women of their vulnerable condition" (Humm, 1992: 234) but it isn't this that leads these women to act. Shavian women knew that traditional values and creeds, like clitoridectomy, would be destabilised if Ayoko's rape was discovered. Ogene, which seemed to "command" the Shavians' way of life, would be put at stake and this would undoubtedly generate instability and lead to the collapse of the Shavian culture not only because of traditional values but also because of Ogene, of Anoku (Ayoko's father, the priest who foresaw who the future Queen Mother would be), and because of the King (who believed Anoku and approved Ayoko's marriage to Asogba). Women perceive that this will be their war "Leave the war to us, the mothers" (Emecheta, 1985: 98), says Siegbo. The association of women, whether mothers, daughters, elders, wives, among others, is of major importance since "the solidarity enjoyed by women in these groups or associations constitutes the mainstay of their survival, their control of their own affairs, and their influence on the men and on the community as a whole" (Ezeigbo, 1996: 10). The attitudes the Shavian women demonstrate towards rape and civilization thus place feminism and postcolonialism as allies, as Terry Eagleton states, "the plight of women (...) has resulted in a peculiarly fruitful alliance between feminism and postcolonialism" (Gairola, 2000). In fact, there are consistent parallels between feminist and postcolonialist

theories both in terms of history and in terms of the main issues as expressed by Gayatri Spivak: “women in many societies have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, “colonized”, forced to pursue the guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from, that *imperium*” (quoted in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1994: 174). Against the ideas pointed out by some feminist critics who argue there is “a tendency towards *male chauvinism* in many forms of nationalism. In using women as icons of the nation, nationalist representations reinforce images of the passive female who depends upon active males to defend her honour” (McLeod, 2000: 114), these women act and react, showing an attitude that is far beyond the idea of passivity.

In fact, throughout Buchi Emecheta’s novels it is possible to trace rape as a recurrent theme, even though its visions are almost always distinct and evidence a clear development of the writer’s ability to separate them: “There is ample evidence in Emecheta’s early and middle novels of her desire to break the cultural code of silence governing female rape and the concomitant difficulty in doing so within the protracted marriage plot that frames much of her fiction” (Allan, 1996: 210). In *The Bride Price*, 1976, there is no rape but a rape plot is presented to the reader. In *Destination Biafra*, 1982, one can perceive Buchi Emecheta’s attempt to establish a parallel between African women and Africa’s nightmarish despoiled body through rape. However, “The act challenges but fails to unsettle the standard practice of rape representation in the African literary establishment, forcing a compromise that undercuts the centrality of women’s rape experience in the novel” (Allan, 1996: 215). In *The Family*, 1990, the theme advances towards incest as a new way of challenging and writing the theme. Marks of rape within

the marriage context are presented in *Second-Class Citizen*, 1994, even though there isn't an open discussion of the subject. The attempts to write rape are also, as we have seen, in *The Rape of Shavi* in which "the tensions between nationalism and feminism, acquiescence and protest, silence and voice that mark her effort to write rape" (Allan, 1996: 224) are presented. According to the author, in an interview with Oladipo Joseph Ogundele, "*The Rape of Shavi* is an allegory about how our area became raped by Europe" (Ogundele, 1996: 449) as it is clearly critical of the West and against the attitudes that characterize colonialism. Rape characterizes inequity among genders almost the same way colonialism reduced the black populace "to a state of impotence and powerlessness by the colonial master" (Ezeigbo, 1996: 16).

The question of rape also serves as a sort of revival of the issue of the albinos being human or not, since Ronje is considered an "uthang" (an animal). Ayoko feels "polluted" (Emecheta, 1985: 97) since she had for the first time been confronted with "human dirt, evil, indignity and violation" (Emecheta, 1985: 97). Although she is told that as Ronje was not human she hadn't been violated nonetheless Ayoko needed a whole new set of rules she hadn't thought of or hadn't been taught to her. Rape had never happened in Shavi and so Ayoko couldn't know how to act accordingly in an unpredictable situation. The women's war was accordingly based on the principle that Ronje was an animal. This association with bestiality may be seen in two different ways. First, it can be connected with the way English people, in particular, and the colonizers in general, saw both the native peoples, in general, and Asogba, in particular, "He became a spectacle, almost non-human, a curiosity piece" (Emecheta, 1985: 141). Second, as a way of justifying their action: an animal, he would attack again and so their war would be carried

out in order to “purify” their “land” (Emecheta, 1985: 99). Ayoko starts seeing her mother as a “warrior” (Emecheta, 1985: 98). The women catch, trap and abandon Ronje to the mercy of wild animals. The way these women act may lead us to remember the tradition of female African action. This female communal action is a common practice in Africa and Emecheta may be trying, again, to convey a connection between the women in Shavi and Nigerian women by showing Shavian women struggling against such issues as physical abuse, an analogy to women who similarly executed “sex-offenders” in Emecheta’s native country. The way these women react against an inherently woman’s problem may also be a contrasting factor between Buchi Emecheta’s *The Rape of Shavi* and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Throughout Buchi Emecheta’s novel there are several occasions in which women show their independence, their capacities and their self-determination which clearly contrasts with Achebe’s female characters who “exist only to react to men” (Zyshe, 1998). In fact, in *The Rape of Shavi* women are not restricted to men’s authority and they show some power even though they “seem to be mostly in a state of powerlessness” (Ezeigbo, 1996: 15).

From the opening scene to the last episodes women become the focal point of this novel. Both Western and African women’s encounter and traditional common practices in Shavi give birth to a number of situations that, as Judie Newman points out, suggest “that feminism may have an important role to play in relation to apparently oppressed African women” (Newman, 1995). In fact, throughout the novel there are several moments in which Western feminists and African (Shavian) feminists are confronted with women’s issues, for example clitoridectomy, polygamy, child bearing practices and arranged marriages. Western feminists’ ideas that frequently perceive African as the dark continent

where “primitive” practices must be guided into productive paths by enlightened Europeans are used as a way of justifying Western influence but also as a way of denouncing its negative preconceptions and consequences.

The encounter between African traditionalists, Shoshovi (King Patayon’s first wife and the ruling Queen Mother), Siegbo (Ayoko’s mother) and Iyalode (the priestess of Ogene) represent the Shavians’ traditions, and western feminists, Andria and Ista (the western females who arrived in the “bird of fire”), give birth to a series of discussions deserving detailed analysis. One is clitoridectomy. This is, according to western standards, something unthinkable which violates women’s rights concerning sexuality and equal sexual opportunities. Why should women be deprived of the right to enjoy pleasure during the sexual act? Didn’t these women need a Western perspective here in order to avoid being violently operated on? On the other hand, for the Shavian women this operation was essential because it purified them and it was the only way to guarantee a good marriage. Would it be fair to change these women’s attitude towards sexuality in a way which would affect at least six thousand women a day? Feminine genital mutilation provides, in fact, a rich and complex argument for and against cultural relativity. Some African novelists, such as Flora Nwapa, defend the total acceptance of culture, respecting differences in an extreme form, becoming a challenge to our Eurocentric ways of thinking. In fact, we must not forget to mention the common practice of clitoridectomy to clearly understand the rape of Ayoko as a question of “national” importance to the Shavian society. It was believed in Shavi that “if a girl was not clitorised, a man couldn’t enter her” (Emecheta, 1985: 122) and so from the moment of the rape on this becomes untrue since Ayoko was raped, a man had entered her, and she hadn’t been clitorised and this,

besides bringing into question the impossibility of Ayoko marrying the prince, also ends up proving that a traditional belief with respect to sexuality was ill founded, as seen previously.

Polygamy is also an issue that raises conflict and tension between western and African women. Buchi Emecheta is one of the few woman writers to portray polygamy and the picture that is drawn, even though polygamy is something natural in Shavi as in many African countries, is not exactly positive “her vision of this entrenched way of life is far from flattering” (Frank, 1982: 488). The reader faces the issue of polygamy right from the beginning of the novel since the King (the first character to be presented) is about to marry his ninth wife. To the majority of western people this would cause indignation and this can be acknowledged by Flip’s surprise when new wives are offered both to him and Mendoza (Flip and Ronje’s friend) confirming Taetia Zysshe’ argument that “polygamy subverts potential female friendship by forcing women to compete for emotional and economic resources” (Zysshe, 1998). Contradicting this idea, Buchi Emecheta considers that “People think that polygamy is oppression, and it is in certain cases. But I realize, now that I have visited Nigeria often, that some women now make polygamy work for them” (Emecheta, 1988: 176). One must keep in mind that the number of wives the African man possesses measures his wealth and prestige and, in Buchi Emecheta’s words, “In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated” (Emecheta, 1988: 178) for in polygamous marriages the educated woman may have the time and opportunity to value herself as a person and as a professional.

Another issue that deserves our attention is the Shavians' policy as far as marriage is concerned. Girls are betrothed when they are very young, wives are offered to heroes and thus arranged marriages are common in Shavi. Western feminists would consider being betrothed in this fashion as unacceptable as, for example, polygamy. Women (as well as men) should and must have the right to choose their companions and not accept this decision being made by their parents or elders. However, we must admit that not a long time ago in Portugal and in many other European countries this happened frequently, not meaning by this that Shavi was backward. The Shavian women and men see this practice as something which may allow a considerable improvement in their economic circumstances (remember Anoku's scheme to guarantee a prosperous future). We must remember that in some parts of Africa, parents still choose marriage partners for their children "even before they are born" in order "to make absolute sure that they do get someone to marry" (Mbiti, 1991: 107). The arranged marriages that were made in Shavi among the Europeans, between Flip and Andria, Mendoza and Ista, one succeeding and one failing, may be seen as an acceptance and a critique of this practice since besides causing surprise and perplexity both positive and negative aspects are explored.

Tension and grief among the Shavian women and the westerners was also caused by the childbearing practices used by the Shavians. When a woman started labour Ista, a gynaecologist, immediately understood it was going to be a tough birth and both mother and child could be at risk. Ista was unable to cope with the Shavians' practices, although she ended up being surprised by the happy end. Again, besides analysing this specific question, we can think about medicine, confronting traditional practices and modern,



sophisticated ones and there seems to be a suggestion that Africa doesn't need a western intervention as far as traditional female medical practices are concerned.

There are also other aspects that do not directly put into open discussion Shavian and Western women but deserve our attention. In Shavi there were no deformed people, because they were eliminated at birth, for "Every living being had to be able to contribute something to the community" (Emecheta, 1985: 76). This eradication of deformed people from a western perspective reminds us of Hitler's ideals of a pure, Aryan race in which useless people would disappear but so does the "eradication" Ista ended up portraying when she decided to abort "She'd said she wanted the abortion because she had had four children, and didn't want any more" (Emecheta, 1985: 166). The Shavians pursuit of a "perfect" community through the elimination of deformed people finds its counterpart in Ista's decision to "eliminate" her child even though one must consider that this child was also the result of a failed arranged marriage, as claimed by Ista.

Taking into account that Ayoko's rape is a metaphor for the rape of the Shavian culture we must sort out the meaning of the words community and rape. Communities, taking into account their possible differences concerning cultures, religions, languages and customs, have to try to balance individual and communal desires. According to Russel McDougall (McDougall, 1986: 24-33) within each culture there are three basic oppositions which may cause "internal" problems. These oppositions can be identified throughout *The Rape of Shavi* : the tension between generations (King Patyon's resistance to change and his wise saying foreseeing the future "things will never be the same again" and Asogba's desire to interchange and benefit from the meeting of cultural

differences); the tension between men and women (seen in the women's attitude towards Ayoko's rape and polygamy); and the tension between person and community (Asogba's desire to rule, to militarise, to cause jealousy and to change the community's way of living against their own will). Communities are rarely unified in their viewpoints. Concerning the definition of the word "rape" we must take into account the physical as well as the metaphoric meanings. From the common sense perspective rape is "to have sex with (someone, especially a woman) against their will" (Longman, 1992: 1087). This meaning of the word "rape" is evident in *The Rape of Shavi* since Ayoko was raped, sexually abused, by Ronje. Taking into account a metaphoric meaning we can say that Shavi was raped because it was changed and culturally abused by another culture against its will. The actions taken by the different characters help us to realise who the real rapist might be: Ronje, Flip and Asogba. Ronje, the physical rapist, carried out an undoubtedly violent action against Ayoko which was the beginning of a series of events which led to the destruction of Shavi. However, Ronje wasn't the main person responsible for the rape of Shavi. Flip, the man who found out about the crystals and their value was also responsible. If he hadn't found out that the crystals were valuable, Mendoza wouldn't have planned to trade them. "Ultimately it is his intelligence that rapes Shavi" (Newman, 1995). Although Flip regretted his awareness of the value of the crystals, he is to blame since as an outsider he felt greed towards a richness which didn't belong to him (has Ronje had felt greed towards Ayoko). Asogba was delighted with the outsiders' way of living. Defying everyone and betraying his own community, he left Shavi anxious to learn from the westerners. His dream became a nightmare since he felt raped in his idealism. This was the price to pay for betrayal. Civilisation transformed Asogba in such a way that he

changed from victim of rape to rapist. Asogba tried to “westernise” Shavi in spite of having tasted its poisonous flavour. Being an insider (in contrast to Ronje and Flip) reinforces Asogba’s guilt because he acts against his own people. Asogba and Ronje are both punished with death, either suggested or stated. Ronje took advantage of his physical strength to rape Ayoko and ironically he was punished by those he believed he could dominate – women. Asogba took advantage of his social status to consider himself above the others and he was also ironically punished since all his strength and royalty didn’t prevent him from being vulnerable to disease. Fate seems to surprise Ronje and Asogba and all they stand for. Both western and Shavian cultures (through Ronje and Asogba) were defeated by the ones they tried to adjust according to their arrogant assumptions. Forgetting that one’s freedom ends where the others’ starts leads to a death trap metaphorically confirmed in the novel by the tragic ending. Ironically the European pacifists that landed in the flourishing Shavian community are ultimately responsible for the destruction of the Shavian culture and for the beginning of two wars, one among men and the other among women. These wars on the one hand reflect Kate Millett’s argument that considers that “Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures” (Millett, 1989: 31) and on the other hand they reflect both men’s and women’s different attempts to validate western influence. However, both arguments are spurious, for as Judie Newman states, “western interventionism, both violently male and condescendingly female, has ended in disaster” (Newman, 1995).

## Chapter 2

Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita*



Lindsey Collen was born in Transkei in South Africa in 1948. There she lived a tumultuous life since her father was an antiapartheid native affairs commissioner at a time when the fight against apartheid was the basis for the country's greatest troubles. She became interested in the political situation early in her life and her parents encouraged her interest. Lindsey Collen went to University where she studied law and literature and became a student leader. She now lives in Mauritius and is very active in political organisations and has wide support from within the left wing party, women's liberation movements and from Mauritius women in general. Lindsey Collen's main themes, from her first novel *There is a Tide*, 1990, to *Getting Rid of It*, 1997, involve issues concerning the oppression that afflicts people in general and women in particular and the fight against the several types of oppression. In Shawkat M. Toorawa's words, "The first, *There is a Tide*, 1990, is, like the others, poignant writing about individuals struggling to go about the business of living beneath the oppressive and stifling weight of unjust social, political, and religious systems" (Toorawa, 1999: 28).

A few hours after the appearance of *The Rape of Sita*, in 1993, Hindu fundamentalists opposed the title of the book since Sita is a common name in Mauritius and especially because it was considered blasphemous to the Hindu goddess Sita. Sita is the venerated Hindu character from the *Ramayana* epic, an idealized image of womanhood characterized by chastity, purity and virtuosity. Lindsey Collen was forced to

stop the book's publication and distribution and the Mauritius government confiscated the copies already published, banned the book and established a police inquiry. The Prime Minister declared the book was "blasphemous" and an "outrage against public and religious morality" (3). Lindsey Collen experienced harsh censorship, threats to her life and continuing accusations of blasphemy. The banishment of *The Rape of Sita* brings into question the way censorship functions and who or what its main targets are. Censorship can be defined as a means that prevents certain works of art, that express ideas and views not in accord with the dominant ideologies, and others, from reaching the audience they are addressed to. It is frequently used in order to maintain the dominant order whether the author is male or female. However, and taking into account that women's writings have been marginalised for centuries, certain works by women authors have also been censored due to their themes. On another gender based level, women were not considered able to write about certain issues, considered men's issues having to centre the focus of their attention on issues considered as women's issues. By doing this, the existing order manages to restrict the impact of the denouncement of women's real conditions under the inequity of patriarchy and so, in the specific case of *The Rape of Shavi*, "Fervent and immediate opposition to the appearance of the novel confirms its accuracy in criticizing patriarchal control and the silencing of subordinated groups, whether in government or religious contexts" (Mack, 2000: 77). In fact, in this book one can find a variety of oppressions and specific political references that together with serious disguised allusions to different ethnicities and religious affiliations question the government's authority and control of the individual, whether women through patriarchy or men through colonialism and capitalism.

Nowadays, one can say that the images of fragmented female bodies proliferate in contemporary African fiction by women. Women face not only the body as a problem but also social and cultural difficulties which prevent an easy integration of the female. However “women’s writings currently represent an important site of cultural intervention for examining both the ideological contradictions in dominant social formations as well as the various subjugated modes of resistance and alterity that emerge to combat patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial oppressions” (Emberley, 1993: 4). It has been difficult in some contexts for women both to publish and to fit the criteria of the literary industry and due to this much women’s writing has been misjudged, forgotten or even forbidden to be published.

Lindsey Collen’s novels, in general, and *The Rape of Sita*, in particular reflect a deep engagement to the Mauritian history that is shown by a constant involvement with issues that reflect the changes, the oppressions, the violations that Mauritius and other countries have gone and are still going through. There is a variety of historical accounts that are presented either through the use of characters whose names are reminiscent of particular historical moments or through a direct reference to historical facts, such as the occupation of Iraq by the USA or the Mauritian struggles for independence, among others.

*The Rape of Sita* est un roman profondément engagé. .... l’écriture de Collen est militante, démystificatrice, voire polémique, mais jamais réellement propagandiste. .... Elle s’élève contre la manipulation occidentale des médias du monde entier autour de la guerre du Golfe, contre l’état bourgeois et les forces qui lui servent de base, contre la colonisation du peuple réunionnais à quelques années du troisième



millénaire, contre la société que permet la domination et l'aliénation des femmes (Couronne, 2003)

Lindsey Collen seems to be particularly interested in analysing women's situation in Mauritius, and throughout the world, by denouncing the traumas and the tragic situation most women live in since they are subject to men's dominance and to living at an inferior level. These expressed concerns may lead us to consider Lindsey Collen's writing, and *The Rape of Sita*, as able to be considered as a feminist text, "Si l'on considère qu'un roman féministe est un roman qui révèle les pratiques oppressives et répressives du phallocratisme patriarcal, *The Rape of Sita* est, dans une large mesure, un roman féministe, même si Collen arrive, grâce à son talent, à éviter la propagande simpliste" (Couronne, 2003). In fact, besides a historical involvement, which includes the effects of colonialism, we can also notice a fervent reaction against the legacy left by the colonizers that reinforced Mauritius's patriarchal system placing women at an inferior level and as a subjugated group.

*The Rape of Sita* is the story of a woman named Sita who was raped by a "friend", Rowan Tarquin, some years before the beginning of the novel. This story is told by her friend Iqbal, a man haunted by the desire to be a woman, a storyteller prepared to tell stories anew all the time and without stopping. This novel is both modern in its conception and reminiscent of oral folk tales and myths. It mixes several genres such as novel, diary and poem, being difficult to define as a single genre. There is a free use of everything that surrounds the author and so there are constant reminiscences of other literary works. There is, in Beverley B. Mack's words "a literary carnival, including the Indian *Ramayana*

epic, Elizabethan literary allusions, and nineteenth-century Islamic theology” (Mack, 2000: 75). This mixture of genres, together with the reference to several periods of time, inflects the novel’s and the main character’s fragmentation. The constant interference of a multiplicity of influences is also seen within the text itself since to the English language words from Creole and other languages are frequently added. This may happen because the author intends to present the linguistic diversity that characterizes most colonial countries and, at the same time, elaborate a harsh critique of the state of things, corroborating “Bakhtin’s attention to the mixture of languages within a text, which both ironises and unmask authority, demonstrates a new level of linking the concept of hybridity to the politics of representation” (Papastergiadis, 2000: 267). However, one can also regard the presence of various genres, languages, religions (Hinduism, Muslimism, Christianity) and ethnicities, as a reflex of Southern Africa itself, in line with what Albie Sachs states, “We all know where South Africa is, but we do not yet know what it is” (quoted in Walder, 1998: 152 - 153). The choice of a non-linear narrative strategy, which includes frequent retrospective sections, requires the reader’s constant attention, much like that needed to understand all the historical references. As a political activist Lindsey Collen is worried about her country’s history and its fate in the transition from colonialism to a form of postcolonialism. However, a notion of history as something cyclical whose main problems are basically the same is also presented. For Ashis Nandy “all encounters produce change” (quoted in Papastergiadis, 2000: 266) and thus one must take into account that Mauritius’s history has involved immigration and colonization by different peoples at different times, as seen previously. Thus, the interactions between different people with different beliefs and creeds results in a conflict of interests and especially a

conflict of identities, particularly seen in a postcolonial context as Nikos Papastergiadis in *Debating Cultural Hybridity* argues, “The clash of cultures that colonialism invariably provoked, rather than producing a neat bifurcation between coloniser and colonised, encouraged the formation of new cultural hybrids” (Papastergiadis, 2000: 264). The analysis of the main characters’ names, Iqbal, Dharma, Rowan Tarquin and Sita, will lead the attentive reader to conclude that the names of characters were carefully chosen in order to emphasize the multiplicity and variety of references to historical, social, religious and even political aspects that constitute Mauritius and characterize the multicultural and diverse postmodern world.

Iqbal’s fragmented and pluralistic identity, seen as a narrative device that serves several objectives, is shown in two different ways: first because he transgresses gender boundaries, second because of the ambiguity of his functions within the novel. On the one hand, throughout the novel, the song “*Iqbal was a man who thought he was a woman*” (Collen, 1996: 8) constantly taunts Iqbal. In fact, Iqbal changes his identity in different situations and turns out to be neither a man nor a woman, challenging the audience to consider the classification of human beings as male or female as something unnecessary. On the other hand, Iqbal is the narrator, the guide, the character and also the critic of the novel. Even though he never appears as a real character within the story, he seems to be determined to fight for Sita’s defence and he guides us towards a clearer understanding of both Sita and the novel as a whole. Iqbal of Umpire is named after Muhammad Iqbal, a Pakistani Muslim who was a poet, philosopher, politician, and lawyer and who “promoted the principles of independent judgment (...) and rule by consensus (...) in a parliamentary system” (Mack, 2000: 81). Thus, Iqbal presents the reader with the pros and cons that

may pronounce Sita guilty or not guilty for the rape through an exhaustive questioning and awareness-raising strategy so that each reader may freely judge both Sita's actions and inaction as well. As has been said, Iqbal tries to protect Sita by being a witness but he is also a judge of the rape scene. He not only makes us think about the reasons why Sita was unable to act but he also almost accuses her for her passivity. In fact, he frequently interrupts his storytelling function to make the reader aware of his presence, asking the questions the reader would probably like to ask and helping the reader to understand Sita's actions and ways of thinking, "persons like you, reader, who will ask me, the storyteller, a certain question, which other listeners will invariably nod at, meaning it needs an answer" (Collen, 1996: 23), and thus establishing a constant dialogue with the reader. Besides all the obvious functions Iqbal plays in *The Rape of Shavi*, one might also add another one connected with literary authority. Taking into account what was said about "women's writings" and their constant marginalisation throughout most literary traditions, it may be that Lindsey Collen decided to chose Iqbal as the narrator of *The Rape of Shavi* to confer more credibility on what is being stated and to reinforce the gender critique already discussed.

Dharma is a character whose main worries, unlike those of Iqbal, are centred on the human condition in the world as a whole. This character's name also deserves attention since according to the Hindu tradition *dharma* is connected with a set of strategies that help human beings to escape the suffering caused by existence. Sita's father sees him as an idealised figure, "Dharma is perhaps a great leader of the poor, or a prophet of the people" (Collen, 1996: 15) and, in fact, he almost acquires a god-like status. Dharma is Sita's companion and partner even though they do not live under the

structure of marriage and the junction of these two characters may be attributed, in Beverly M. Mack's words, to "Collen's intention in pairing characters named after the Hindu goddess Sita, and the Hindu concept of *dharma*, is clearly to unify these Eastern philosophies, as well as to reflect the multiplicity of ethnic and religious backgrounds of the Indian immigrants who populate Mauritius" (Mack, 2000: 81). Even though being absent most of the novel, Dharma, Sita's partner, plays an essential role in Sita's liberation assuming almost an elevated condition "Dharma will heal me"(Collen, 1996: 152). Dharma was the one who managed to take Sita out of her blocked world in which she was entrapped. He ends up being the representation of rightness, the ideal representation of the male principle that confirms that "The concept of *dharma* includes the principle of cosmic existence and the idea of an individual's fulfilment of duty in life through the pursuit of cosmic Truth, which is the rationale for human existence" (Mack, 2000: 80 - 81). Dharma is a character who clearly opposes the colonial system that oppresses men and women, and can be compared with Sita's father, Mohun Jab, who was an important man in the first Mauritius mutiny against the colonial government and who was also against the institution of marriage for it, too, reinforced oppression.

Sita's rapist, Rowan Tarquin, must also be paid special attention with respect to the symbolism of his name. On the one hand, Rowan can be immediately associated with *Ravana*, the character from the *Ramayana* who abducted Sita, "Sita has herself been ravished by a contemporary Ravana – Rowan the rapist" (Mack, 2000: 80 - 81). The choice of two names from the *Ramayana* one that stands for the best of a "perfect" community, Sita, and the other for the worst of it, Rowan, is also significant since it brings into question the eternal Manichaeian conflict between man and woman, good and evil,

right or wrong that, through these allusions, knows no place and no time. The surname Tarquin, on the other hand, reminds us of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* in which Lucius Tarquinius, Lucrece's husband's friend, who admires both her virtue and beauty, rapes Lucrece. According to Shawkat M. Toorawa "*The Rape of Sita*, 1994, sends us to Shakespeare in a different way. Collen's decision to name her protagonist Sita, after a venerated Hindu character, was the focus of much public attention, but it is Rowan's rape of Sita that captivated the minds of readers, and sent them back to Tarquin and the rape of sweet Lucrece" (Toorawa, 1999: 28). Shakespeare is, in fact, an important English reference in the novel and an analogy between *The Rape of Lucrece* by William Shakespeare and *The Rape of Sita* by Lindsey Collen is created proving Mazisi Kunene's argument that "non-African South African literature is characterised stylistically and thematically by an imitative quality derived from its European influence (...) South African Literature, particularly in English, remains on the whole obsequious to the European models" (Kunene, 1996: 14). In fact, Shakespeare is familiar in Mauritius schools both on the English and on the English Literature syllabus throughout secondary school and "Historically, Shakespeare was used in South Africa to contest as well as foster racism" although "Martin Orkin argues that Shakespeare can be used progressively within the South African context. But at the same time, it is also necessary to challenge the Eurocentric canons that are still taught in many parts of the once-colonised world" (Loomba, 2002: 93). In this context, however, the use of Shakespeare may have other goals besides those pointed out above and that will be discussed further on. The rapes of both the *Ramayana's* Sita and of Shakespeare's Lucrece give birth to a series of changes within the structures of their governments. In the first case, Rama, Sita's husband, starts a

fierce struggle against all the Ravanas who came to symbolize all evil. In the second, and after Lucrece's suicide, her family begins a revenge that results in "the ultimate transformation of the (patriarchal) political state" (Mack, 2000: 80). Contrarily, in *The Rape of Sita*, and against what the reader might expect, the rape of Sita is not going to bring such a drastic change for the better in Mauritius, even though it certainly caused the government dissatisfaction and anger due to the novel's defiance of the established rules. After being raped Lucrece commits suicide and this is different from the way Lindsey Collen's Sita reacts after the rape. After overcoming the silence that will characterize the years after the rape, Sita, however, also considers suicide as a solution to despair, rage and sense of loss. In fact, Collen's Sita foresees the same context, means and *modus operandi*, "Like Lucrece did. Aim well for the heart. Sharp knife. Fall onto it. Yes, Lucrece killed herself after Tarquin raped her long ago" (Collen, 1996: 191).

At this point, it might seem interesting to analyse the section of the book that begins by "It had been prophesied that Rowan would *not* rape Sita. But this wouldn't necessarily stop him. Prophecies only worked long ago" (Collen, 1996: 65). Rowan Tarquin, according to his mother, had a split personality since he was not able to stop doing something he didn't agree with. Rowan is presented as having a long history of sexual abuse, from two rapes at the age of fourteen to the constant rape of his own wife within marriage, even though he considers the last not to be rape for he couldn't rape someone whom he considers his. Rowan is always haunted by the desire to rape Sita even though he feels she doesn't deserve it, "Rape, he thought, is the vilest deed. Destroy her. 'My head will split in two. I feel it now. Why harm her, hurt her, dirty her with my filth?'"

(Collen, 1996: 139). He thinks Sita is perfect and feels jealous about Dharma who has got her favour, who is successful and who is loved by everyone. Rowan's envy can be understood in terms of natural selection in which males compete for females and so he decides to rape her for he feared Sita's denial and he wouldn't be able to deal with such a humiliation. This brings into question traditional ideas that do not attribute to women the power of choice and Rowan's unconscious awareness of the opposite. The head split may thus signify a break from tradition that must be taken in order to free women from their submissive status and to give them the right to choose their partners, to desire, to say "yes" or "no" in sexual terms and indeed in everything. The mental split, that is always present with respect to rape, meaning the struggle between traditional ideals and up-to-date ones, can be seen as both a critique of the present state of things and also an awareness of the intemporality of oppression or oppressions throughout the world and throughout time for "If even fiercely independent Sita, raised to be strong and self-reliant, can be raped, and even if the legendary Sita, wife of Rama in the *Ramayana* epic, could be carried off (she was not raped in the epic), then what woman could be safe? In that case even the strongest of nations also could be raped, pillaged, and colonized" (Mack, 2000: 79). The notion of time is essential because "time is the mother of all life" (Collen, 1996: 96) and because men and women are always doomed to a past, a present and a future that invariably condition their actions.

In *The Rape of Sita*, as has already been stated, the characters' names are generally used symbolically in order to represent much more than the characters themselves and Sita is no exception. Named after the Hindu goddess of the *Ramayana* who stands for the idea of perfect womanhood, Sita is not much like her predecessor. In



fact, Lindsey Collen's Sita is a real character who moves in a real world, who suffers the torments of an ordinary woman constantly being exploited by a male-dominated society, she is a woman who has desires and pains, in short a fully fledged human being. While the Ramayana's Sita could be seen as an ideal to copy, Lindsey Collen's Sita is not like her supernatural model and this may be regarded as an attempt to escape stereotypes like the ones portrayed by the *Ramayana* and other epics since the world Collen's Sita moves in, as all human worlds, is far from being perfect and ideal.

Reunion, where the physical rape took place is, according to Sita, "*the colony of the colonies*" (Collen, 1996: 20) that, like Mauritius, was oppressed and subjugated by the forces of the imperial power that disrupted both its land and its people. Colonialism becomes the rape of a territory from which both the colonized peoples and the colonized lands can never escape, as "In colonialist as well as nationalist writing, racial and sexual violence are yoked together by images of rape, which in different forms, becomes an abiding and recurrent metaphor for colonial relations" (Loomba, 2002: 164). After the departure of the oppressors, women remain both the physical and the psychological targets of domination and subjugation and this may have happened since the "desire for colonial control was often expressed in terms of sexual control" and the association of women with the colonized land "legitimated perceptions of both women and land as objects of colonisation (Blunt, 1994: 10). In fact, one must keep in mind the recurrent association of women with nation that generated images of the colonized nations as "available for plunder, possession, discovery and conquest" (Loomba, 2002: 151) and the way the colonizers raped the colonized women in order to reduce them, and indeed men as well, creating the rape scenario elaborated by Eric Meyer: "The thrust of the narrative

enacts the colonization of the Orient, as the imperious male European ego penetrates the feminized space of the East; and the subjection of the veiled feminine other becomes an image of the submission of the Orient to the Occidental principle" (quoted in Paxton, 1999: 3). Just by being in Reunion, and even before being physically raped, Sita feels "Already raped, and still to be raped. Which part of this is the rape?" (Collen, 1996: 152) and she realises that rape is everywhere "In the mind of man, in the body of politic" (Collen, 1996: 194). From the moment Sita got to Reunion, already perceived as a land of oppression, she is faced with situations and thoughts that make her feel strongly oppressed. Sita who claimed to be a fearless woman was now trapped within "A suffocating feeling of being prisoner" (Collen, 1996: 107). She felt like a prisoner constantly haunted by the fear of men and by the sense of submission, humiliation and defeat. Sita becomes the medium through which two hundred years of colonization are expressed and this makes her feel "The smell of fear. The smell of slavery. The smell of the fear of Rape" (Collen, 1996: 112). Sita deconstructs the notion of rape into the wider notion of the strong conquering the weak that causes her physical illness, her nausea, her fear. Rape is everywhere, it is in every place, at every time different people get together. This corroborates the idea that rape is not only a private sexual aggression but also a wider act of aggression against oppressed groups, an idea confirmed by the Combahee River Collective "Currently, feminist theory takes the view that rape is a political act of terror against an oppressed group." (Humm, 1992: 234). At this time and in this specific context, Sita becomes aware that women have gone through and are still going through a double colonization: one, from the former colonizers and the other from the patriarchal world inherited and reinforced by the process of colonization. The patriarchal system thus becomes the new

dominant form of colonialism, one which was strengthened by the colonizers themselves. Women become the new colonized subjects, even though there is a conscious awareness that oppression had begun a long time before, "What oppressions have I accepted long before this night of the attack" (Collen, 1996: 147). The clash of patriarchy and colonialism results in the victory of the first and rape, whether physical, psychological or moral, will apparently always remain in every society and in every place and time. Sita is conscious that men were also mentally raped by the colonizers, who humiliated and turned men into an oppressed group, and that men turned to rape women as they also saw women as an oppressed group. This consciousness can be perceived when Sita questions herself "Is Reunion rapist and raped? The colonizer and the colonized?" (Collen, 1996: 193).

The patriarchal world Sita lives in thus makes her go through a psychological rape even before she was physically raped. Sita's awareness of her psychological disruption makes her lose her memory and causes her inability to recognise herself after the physical rape and consequently she becomes mentally and psychologically fragmented. This turns Sita into an alien in her own native country, as V.S.Naipaul said in *A Way in The World*, "Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves" (Naipaul, 1995: 102), since she is always trying to run away even from her own self and becomes tragically trapped between the "old colonialism" and its asymmetrical disparities of power and the new form of domination that was reinforced by the colonial process: patriarchy. In Reunion she is not only in the middle of a cultural clash but also a gender-based one. Her loss of memory can also be understood as robbery of time resultant from women's domination and "inexistence" as fully-fledged human beings and thus having no history. Her psychological breakdown emphasises the idea that rape not only focuses attention on physical states

but also on mental states and the way these are expressed and understood. Sita's destabilised behaviour becomes the mode of expression which together with the loss of memory and silence come to mean the loss of womanhood. The binary oppositions between men and women, reason and madness, speech and silence are thus brought together and fulfilled.

Sita loses her identity and starts behaving madly when she loses her memory. Sita's madness can be paralleled with the madness described by some critics who claim that "The colonised land seduces European men into madness" making Africa "a place where the European mind disintegrates and regresses into a primitive state. Africa, India, China and other alien lands induce madness, they *are* madness itself" (Loomba, 2002: 136). Sita perceives Reunion as a chaotic system she doesn't understand and this traces an inescapable path towards a psychological breakdown and madness. Silence and the surrender to patriarchy are the only ways that guarantee her survival in a society ruled by men where it is "more dangerous indoors, in the privacy" where "Husbands, brothers, fathers, friends, acquaintances" (Collen, 1996: 189) are free to inflict inhuman and cruel treatment. Silence and the surrender to patriarchy is, according to Sita's dream, the only way to keep alive, "*The dream told her you had to pay a price to get out alive sometimes, and you sometimes could not tell about it afterwards, even if you wanted to*" (Collen, 1996: 116). Sita is unable to speak and to remember what had happened to her. Silence then becomes a representation of the space between what had really happened and her inability to deal with it. According to Maud Ellmann "The connection between rape and women's silence may be traced back to the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which the barbarous king Tereus rapes his sister-in-law Philomela and cuts out her tongue so that

she cannot accuse him of the crime.” (Ellmann, 1999: 34). Sita had gone through moral degradation from which return was impossible. Perhaps as she didn’t exactly know the meaning of what had happened to her she wasn’t able to fill in that space with words. She was raped, confined and silenced. The whole distinction between “word” and “event” is called into question. She only knew she was looking for the “black hole”, “the missing hours”, “the underworld”, diving through pain and despair desperately trying to understand what, how, when, why and who made her feel that “something terrible happened in Reunion” (Collen, 1996: 38). The idea of the search for the “black hole” can be associated with the notion of women as a “dark continent”, especially in sexual terms, and Sita’s inability to act as an unresolved Oedipus complex. The sense of “lack” and of “penis-envy”, in a phallogentric society in which having a penis becomes synonymous with power, causes Sita’s passivity and Sita’s search for the “black hole”, “the underworld”, led to rage, “ The rage of the history of wounded womankind. And with it: Slavery. The slavery of humans historically doomed to be unable to move” (Collen, 1996: 37). In fact, Sita’s rage was not only male-oriented but it was against the clear voicelessness regarding issues such as slavery, colonialism, women’s rights, decolonisation and other social and cultural matters, a certain “inability to express a position in the language of the ‘master’ as well as the textual construction of woman as silent” (Mann, 1995: 76).

Sita’s passivity and silence must therefore be understood considering social, psychological and historical factors which were determinant to her amnesia. Sita’s passivity can also be seen as a reflex of both men’s and women’s passivity towards colonialism as Ketu H. Katrak argues, “Both men and women were encouraged to adopt a passivity exclusively associated with femininity, although *only* for the purposes of breaking

colonial authority and *not* patriarchal authority” (quoted in McLeod, 2000: 179). This brings into question the extent to which colonized women, and men, ever can and do really express themselves freely and independently, activating Gayatri Spivak’s idea that the subaltern can’t speak and questioning Homi Bhabha’s assumption that the subaltern can speak since the inappropriate imitations of the colonial discourse have the effect of menacing colonial authority. This last supposition was also raised by Ania Loomba: “In what voices do the colonised speak – their own, or in accents borrowed by their masters? (Loomba, 2002: 231). Either unable to speak or aware of the fruitless verbalization of what happened to her, Sita’s submission and her constant passivity are quite significant since they almost represent her subconscious and even her conscious mind. Sita is both at war within herself and with the idea of being raped both physically and psychologically. Not knowing how to act, she feels trapped, imprisoned and suffocated by her constant indecision and weakness, a phobia against men who “threaten” to rape her all the time. Every man becomes a symbol of rape and violence and Sita is unable to act and react to what is happening to her. Rape, in Lindsey Collen’s words is the “ravenous personification of disorder” (Collen, 1996: 180) since women cannot say “yes” and / or “no” they become prisoners of their own passivity, recalling Cixous’s “either woman is passive or she does not exist” (quoted in Moi, 1985: 105).

Taking into account that rape depends on verbal testimony, the invaded “property” must describe the crime in words so that the sexual intercourse without consent can be proved, “Rape, then, depends for its existence and its prosecution on the victim’s word: it is her ‘no’, in the first instance, that distinguishes the act of rape from an act of sex, and it is her word in court that proves that she did not consent, or even that the act occurred”

(Ellmann, 1999: 36). The context in which women have to verbalise the act is somehow partial in its nature. Women's condemnation starts with the verbalisation of the act through a metaphorical approach, "Are houses really jails run for the government by individual men?" (Collen, 1996: 188). Was Sita, like Mauritius, Reunion and the former colonies, unable to say "yes" or "no" and only able to accept the inevitability of oppression, one or the other. In Devina's words (Sita's friend) "until we [women] can say 'yes' in complete freedom, how can we convincingly say 'no'? Our noes only mean a form of yes" (Collen, 1996: 180). Was Sita's "no" a form of yes? Robin Warshaw in *I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on recognizing, fighting and surviving date and acquaintance rape*, has also raised the question of whether it is worthwhile for women to say "no" since "When it comes to sexual relations, saying 'no' is often meaningless when the words are spoken by a female" (Warshaw, 1994: 42).

*The Rape of Sita*, can even, to a certain extent, be understood as a no-rape situation. The word "rape" implies sexual violence but there are many aspects throughout the novel which lead us to think that physical violence wasn't used. The aspects that lead us to think about a no – rape situation are essentially presented by Iqbal who defies the reader to analyse each situation Sita is involved in through the presentation of moral dilemmas, "*Here is the first dilemma, dear reader. Should she have gone to the Seychelles at all?*" (Collen, 1996: 55). Iqbal constantly interrupts his story-telling function in order to make the reader aware of the possible signs that might have alerted Sita to the dangers she was facing but that were not noticed by Sita or that Sita consciously decided not to notice. In fact, Sita calls the Tarquins, in spite of feeling that the closer she got to the telephone the sicker she felt just by being in Reunion, and she almost invites herself to

Rowan's apartment. When she found out that Noella wasn't there she still wasn't put off since going to Rowan's apartment was the only way to escape the streets of Reunion that menaced to rape her at every corner, from the men in the street to the pornographic films on the bus and the only way she managed to find in order to get to Mauritius in time for the commemoration of the First of May. Even when being "attacked" by Rowan she never really opposes Rowan violently and this might lead us to think if a simple "no" shouldn't be enough. She doesn't scream, she doesn't fight or rebel against him and she even takes her clothes off, inspired by the Chagos women's story in which these women were threatened with rape and defied the men who tried to rape them by taking off their clothes. Sita thought about everything except what was happening to her at that moment. She thought about all the constraints society imposes, about colonial oppression, about Dharma, about the USA's rape of Iraq, about the necessity of elaborating an escape plan that due to constant excuses she never puts into practice. Sita's "no" can be understood as a "yes" also because after the rape she shares the same bed, the same bath, the same coffee with her rapist Rowan. The belief that a woman's "no" really means a "yes", or that women secretly desire to be raped because they are suffering from sexual frustration, is a recent superstition probably derived from Freud who claimed that "the unconscious was incapable of saying no. Historians of rape have found scant evidence of this belief in other cultures or in earlier stages of our own" (Ellmann, 1999: 37). Was Sita afraid of saying "yes" in a patriarchal society which wouldn't accept her "yes"? What were the circumstances which prevented her from acting against her oppressor? Why did she wait for the sexual intercourse to finish to forget about it? Maybe this inability to act, this passivity, hides her desires as a woman which would not be understood in her patriarchal



society in which women are not allowed to have desires in the way that men do. Wouldn't she be looked at as "a bad girl", as she says, if she followed her instincts and desires? Sita's letter to God, at the end of the novel, is also something that is used to prove that Sita's "no" was a disguised hidden consent for she asks God: "Make me a good girl for christ's sake amen" (Collen, 1996: 187). The attempt to suggest that it may be of a no-rape situation could intend to show a much wider and more ambivalent rape: the rape of all people by the forces of oppression and, more specifically, the rape of all women by all men under patriarchy.

To reinforce women's fruitless struggles within an uneven power differential Lindsey Collen presents the reader with some examples of other women who had gone through the rape trauma (Doorga, Véronique, among others). Véronique, Sita's friend, who "was raped by four policemen inside the police station, behind closed doors (...) when she had gone to get help" (Collen, 1996: 165) is one example that clearly denounces men's and women's unequal statuses for if the ones who were supposed to protect and help people in danger are the ones who inflict this type of subjugation what else can we expect from ordinary citizens?. Besides Véronique, all the examples of raped women presented tend to prove that there is no point in verbalising rape since women are always to blame in one way or another. Dessie Woods, another example, was condemned for life because she killed her rapist with the knife with which he was threatening her. Verbal and physical reactions are condemned as negative examples. Taking into account this approach, Sita's passivity and silence is "justified": "The effect of this silence is that rape comes to be regarded as a constant of nature, like sex itself, so that it is up to

women to protect themselves from rape, just as they should carry an umbrella to protect themselves from rain.” (Ellmann, 1999: 48).

Unlike her mother and grandmothers, Sita had had a colonial education which she adopted. All the women in her family had struggled against colonial domination because they hadn't had the type of education Sita had. Sita is then weaker than the former women in her family since she was educated in the coloniser's system and finds it difficult to fight against it, in spite of being a member of the women's movement. She uses Western education as a means for progress and she uses British culture as a basis for the interpretation of the world that surrounds her, thus also showing a surrender to the colonial empire. She belongs both to western and indigenous cultures and at the same time she is also separated from both. However, speaking against colonial authority she ends up being trapped in the colonial trajectory since she doesn't really use elements from her own folk culture or Indian culture except from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In fact, she immerses herself in British culture and fits herself into characters from English Literature. She adopts the “other” culture and she unconsciously assimilates the colonialists' beliefs and values. She starts living the life of these characters and forgets she is human and has her own life to live. She becomes almost a schizophrenic character who considers literature as a part of her life in an unrealistic fashion. Sita is not able to live outside the path of her colonial education even though she seems to speak against the colonial and the patriarchal authority. Unlike the other women from her family, she can't live without the West.

When trying to remember what had happened to her in Reunion, Sita dreams about diving and this diving, according to Freud, is deeply associated with “burial”, a clue

which is directly connected to T.S.Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Sita seems to situate her own life in terms of the conditions and settings of Eliot's poem. Sita is presented diving into the unconscious, into her memory, "diving for a body. For a corpse. Of someone unknown. Something dead."/ "Buried in the recesses of your memory", Dharma had said" (Collen, 1996: 31/32). Only later did Sita manage to remember why the word "buried", previously presented just as diving, had caused such an effect on her. Sita was searching for the buried element in her mind which haunted and taunted her. It was then that she connected the word to T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. In fact, this poem is recurrent throughout the novel, being constantly revisited up until the moment she realises that she was reading that poem when Rowan Tarquin started his approach towards her, "*Wasteland* flying across room, like lost soul, *Wasteland* knocking over ashtray on carpet. Is it a stranger got in , attacked her ?" (Collen, 1996: 142). As in T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land* in which "rape comes to stand for almost everything but rape itself: the fall of cities, the desecration of tradition, and the invasion of the poet's mind by the voices of his dead precursors " (Ellmann, 1999:47), in *The Rape of Sita*, rape also seems to acquire a world-wide dimension. Sita perceives that her pain, her nausea, her entrapment and her sense of oppression are the result of her being the medium through which enchained, colonised and dead slaves express themselves, "Is it the effect, she thought, of two hundred years of colonization, dominating me in one fell swoop? I have taken into my body what everyone here has felt for two hundred years" (Collen, 1996: 109). She comes to represent the suffering of all women world-wide. Sita's rape becomes the rape of the whole continent by its colonisers, the slavery of nations.

Through Sita's character, Collen seems to emphasise the idea that it is almost impossible to separate colonial and post-colonial situations, patriarchal societies and societies that claim equality between men and women. The present and the future are always and will always be connected to the past. The process of decolonisation implied political and economic interventions portrayed by the metropole and so "The term 'neo colonialism' describes the false sense of autonomy the previously dependent colonial territories are said to have achieved" (Emberley, 1993: 6). The apparent freedom from the oppressive colonizers also finds its counterpart in a gender-based analysis since even the independent, free Sita also needs Dharma to save her. This sense of autonomy can be understood as an analogy to Sita's character and attitudes. Colonies and Sita may "feel" independent and free but this idea is a faked one. The colonisers presence as well as their absence has turned out to be disruptive to all of them, especially women. This oppressive representation of the woman as a weak, resigned and passive victim is possibly used to serve Edward Said's purposes as "rhetorically ironic gestures, useful analogies that drive home his point about the discursive machinations of colonial conquest" (Emberley, 1993: 37).

The resistance against the present state of things in *The Rape of Sita*, is presented, most of the time, through women's rebellion against colonialism and against the new form of colonisation - patriarchy. Sita is a political activist who was taught to fight for women's rights and who is interested in politics which means "a human being who hasn't yet given up on the general issues facing humanity, our nature and our culture" (Collen, 1996: 60). However, Sita can't cope with her own "fate" as a "political visionary" (Collen, 1996: 59) and she only seems to represent the need for "Feminist theories of

women's oppressions and resistances (...) constituted by the demands of many new social movements, including (...) anti-racist and anti-imperialist struggles" (Emberley, 1993: xiii). Sita admires the matriarchal system that is represented by the Chagos women who are strong, self-reliant and fearless and therefore she criticizes her sister for not being committed to the cause and for being just a decorative object of pleasure and a tool in men's hands and for her, "la femme n'est valorisée que par son action militante" (Couronne, 2003). Lindsey Collen seems to be doing what Ellen Kuzwayo, a black South African writer, in her path breaking *Call Me Woman* did: "On the one hand, black South African women struggled to withstand the system of multiple discriminations that was apartheid. On the other, they tried to stake out a place for themselves in the always still male-dominated liberation movements" (Boehmer, 1995: 225). Even though a direct racial reference isn't made in *The Rape of Shavi*, there is a matriarchal belief in globalised womanpower that is conveyed through different means including the reference to Sita's ancestors who had fought and died in their fight against the colonial masters and the colonial representations of power as well. In this context, there are constant references to riots, strikes, and conventions against the dominant oppressive forces. However, women still depend heavily on a society which can never become matriarchal and so Sita, living in a patriarchal world ends up submitting to the oppressor, every day like "another day of being colonized. The word went round and round in her mind: colonized" (Collen, 1996: 105). The reader would probably expect Sita to fight against the system, to denounce rape, to kill Rowan maybe, but she is tied up in a world full of examples that prove the inefficacy of the fight. Sita is unable to stand up and fight in order to change things and Dharma becomes the only rescue device thus confirming the necessity to surrender to the

patriarchal world in which only a man is able to restore order after chaos even though the establishment of the “order” only happened eight years and nine months after the rape. Dharma is the only one who can heal Sita, bring Sita back and integrate her into the social structure. Sita ends up surrendering to patriarchy while aware of “The pathetic weakness of patriarchy” (Collen, 1996: 156).

*The Rape of Sita*, by Lindsey Collen, is a novel that raises important issues considering human societies and the individual’s positioning within them. The symbolic images presented in *The Rape of Sita* show a variety of oppressions women and men have to go through and demonstrate that these oppressions can be gender based but also ethnically oriented, religious or nationalist. The repetition of these images aims in addition at the representation of the amalgam that constitutes the contemporary world, reinforcing the idea that we inhabit a world / universe that is characterized by diversity, a mixture of fragmented cultures, identities and ideologies that, in this case, are the result of both colonialism and patriarchy. The idea is to present the tragic conditions in which women both in Mauritius and in the world are living. The image of women seen as the “inferior sex” in patriarchal societies in which they are constantly being raped and are always “carrying the weight of the whole of the earth on their shoulders” (Collen, 1996: 129) is recurrent.

By reading the novel it is possible to trace a Manichaeian approach that reproduces the eternal struggle between “Good” and “Evil”, or at least what is understood as such. This approach is reinforced by a set of dichotomies which are underneath the evolving of the plot. One of the most important dichotomies is personified by Iqbal who has difficulties

in defining himself because he is both man and woman and, at the same time, he is none of them. This duality leads us to the concept of matriarchy and patriarchy. Sita was brought up under a sort of matriarchy, she was taught to fight against patriarchy and she ends up being trapped within the latter. Patriarchy stands for the former colonisation since it is based upon the same oppressive and abusive methods. Women are imprisoned even in their own homes because those who were supposed to protect them are also the ones who abuse, disrespect and threaten them. When they try to escape from this “cage” they realise they are led to a dead end. There is no possible escape. Whether choosing silence or the word, the result is defeat. Whatever period in time women’s situation remains similar. Although Lucrece and Sita belong to different historical epochs their struggles are the same, they both have to face the faceless judges which crowd society.

The rape in *The Rape of Sita* is not at all clear and linear. Sita blames herself for not having followed premonitions, prophesies and clues which should have been enough to dissuade her from her instincts. Sita wasn’t able to deny either colonialism or rape. Thus, *The Rape of Sita* is a metaphor for the cultural “rape” which is the basis of colonialism. Once again, reason and desire clash, recalling the struggle Sita had when confronted with a traditional patriarchal society and the desire to build up a matriarchal one. The book articulates an accurate critique of patriarchal control and the silencing of subordinated groups, whether concerning rape or colonialism. Feminism is seen as a possible answer to patriarchy as postcolonialism is to colonialism. Feminism and postcolonialism become allies although it is extremely difficult to break away from either patriarchy or colonialism. Sita’s rape and / or Sita’s desire to have sexual intercourse outside the relationship that unifies her to Dharma are strategies that introduce the

beginning of a debate that concerns a much wider discussion: the way colonialism and sexism function as allies in the postcolonial context. Moreover, a transcendental view which opposes “Earth” and “Heaven”, “human beings” and “God” is also raised in the novel since the raped woman is named Sita after the Hindu goddess Sita. This approach tends to emphasise the fragility of human beings since not even god-like figures can escape from imperfection. To what extent are we supposed to be perfect when our gods have feet of clay?





## Chapter 3

### *Ama Ata Aidoo's **Changes: A Love Story***



Ama Ata Aidoo was born in 1942 in Abeadzi Kyiakor, Ghana, formerly known as the Gold Coast. Due to the country's historical background and due to its recent developments Aidoo grew up in a complex cultural environment that mixed indigenous traditions with practices imposed by the colonial rulers. She had a Western education, at a time in which early education in colonial schools gave boys preferential treatment, because her parents strongly believed in the value of educating girls as well as boys and because her father considered "formal Western education as the answer to the problems of the limitations of the untrained mind, and the definite waste that was the sum of female lives" (Aidoo, 1999: 12). Even before she graduated from the University of Ghana in 1964, she started to publish poetry and as a result of her education as well as the historical, social and economic characteristics of her country, her works deal with the role of women in society, in the past and at present, and with the effects of the contact between the traditional culture and the Western values brought by colonialism. One of Ama Ata Aidoo's great influences was Efua Sutherland whose writings are focussed on traditional folk materials and forms. However, and in spite of being influenced by this author, Aidoo does not concentrate on the past and on the picturing of Africa's past as a golden age. Instead, she tries to direct the audience's attention to the multiple forms of oppression, exploitation and domination that crowd the African landscape, demanding an urgent process of self-criticism and education, as seen in Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz's remaks,

“Aidoo’s *oeuvre* poses – and to some extent leads to – a resolution of problems concerning how to create a modern African (specifically Ghanaian) society based on the patterns and traditions of non-colonized African past within the context of present-day, technological society; how to engender a *rapprochement* between Africans and Diasporans; how to maintain the dignity of the African woman in her society” (Azodo, 1999: xvii)

African literary texts, until very recently, were almost exclusively written by male European authors and this shaped African literature turning it into an Eurocentric and phallocentric perspective of a world that has much more to offer. Such a perspective has caused a constant misreading of African texts and of African cultural and historical heritage that needs a proper solution, “Frederic Jameson writes of the western reader confronted with a so-called ‘third world text’: we sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as unconventional or naïve, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share” (Booker, 1998: 216). There is thus a need to evaluate and bring up-to-date the critique that is carried out by Europeans, and if on the one hand the critique is frequently trapped within the limits of an Eurocentric view, this trap is enlarged when referring to women writers’ texts. The predominance of this male-dominated literary body creates the need for a new critical perspective free from both Eurocentric and phallocentric views so that works by writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, and other African women writers are properly understood and analysed. Through the creation of different types of modern educated African women, Aidoo has accomplished the difficult task of making a move away from that tendency that puts men at the centre of literary analysis for

“In so many great literatures of the world, women are nearly always around to service the great male heroes. Since I am a woman it is natural that I not only write about women but with women in more central roles, the story which is being told is normally about women” (4). The role of women in African society is thus the central theme in Aidoo’s work, transforming her into both a nationalist and a feminist writer and critic who aims at taking “a nationalist shot at colonialism and proffering a feminist cry against the (gender) oppression of African women” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1999: 283) for she argues that “one cannot claim to be an African nationalist without being a feminist, whether one is a man or a woman” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1999: 282). Aidoo is a committed writer who is determined to give women the chance to verbalize their worries, thoughts and anxieties because she believes that, in Adrola James’s words, “the question of woman writer’s voice being muted has to do with the position of women in the society in general” (quoted in Eke, 1999: 73).

Being aware that art, and literature specifically, aims at the development of the state of things and consequently change, Aidoo uses her strong literary voice as a tool that serves the development of Africa and African feminism through the mixing of several interlocking factors such as gender, economics, race and history, and the way these affect the lives of the African woman. The fact that her works deal with problems that essentially affect women’s lives has created a common consensus around her being an African feminist. Ama Ata Aidoo does not deny this label for she says

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development. It is

not possible to advocate independence for the African continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism (quoted in Collins, 2000: 43).

Ama Ata Aidoo is one of those writers who, against some feminist critics of African literature, deconstructs the stereotyped representations of African women either as silenced victims or as symbols for the African continent. Being a committed writer is also the result of the awareness of the role art and literature play in today's world. A role that involves both a new awareness and an educating function towards the establishment of a more humanized society. She serves not only national interests but also women's interests that are deeply connected as "the survival of the nation is predicated on the survival, liberation and progress of its women, and that the private and the public, the personal and the political must be fully integrated for human progress to be achieved" (Azodo, 1999: xxviii). This author who comfortably writes in each form according to the demands of the situation uses fiction, drama, and poetry, and other literary genres to express her worries and her consciousness in the turbulent cultural and political arena that characterises Africa in order to uncover social problems, to present the oppressions gender, class and race may give birth to, to entertain, to inform, and especially to lead to change and development. Her major works include two plays, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, 1965, and *Anowa*, 1970, two collections of short stories, *No Sweetness Here*, 1970, and *The Eagle and the Chickens and other stories*, 1987, two books of poetry, *An Angry Letter in January*, 1992, and *Someone Talking to Sometime*, 1985, and two novels, *Our Sister Killjoy*, 1977, and *Changes: A Love Story*, 1991, among others.

*Changes: A Love Story* is Aidoo's second novel and focuses on the private life of the protagonist Esi Sekyi especially on her relationships with her husband Oko and her lover and second husband Ali Kondey. The novel starts with an apology both to the reader and to the critic:

To the reader, a confession, and the critic, an apology. Several years ago when I was a little older than I am now, I said in a published interview that I could never write about lovers in Accra. Because surely in our environment there are more important things to write about? Working on this story then was an exercise in words – eating! Because it is a slice from the life and loves of a somewhat privileged young woman and other fictional characters – in Accra. It is not meant to be a contribution to any debate, however current (Aidoo, 1991)

This apology is very interesting since it raises several issues connected with women's writings and the supposed "natural" tendency to write about the so-called women's themes that are always connected with love and the personal sphere of women's lives. What Aidoo is trying to do is to call the reader and the critic's attention to the fact that everything is connected, for as she said, "love is political, and everything is intertwined" (quoted in Odamtten, 1994: 163) thus even a story written by a woman about lovers in Accra can be the basis for a discussion that goes beyond the private sphere into a public debate about more important issues that need to be dwelt on, "For it is here, at the most intimate of personal relations between love between man and woman – that Aidoo critiques the ironies in the changes in the neo / postcolonial world of the African nation – state since independence" (Wilentz, 1999: 275). Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Gay Wilentz



refer to this introduction to the novel as a “downright sarcastic, so-called apology” in which “Aidoo seems to be laughing in the face of those critics who believe that women should eschew politics but only indulge in writing love stories, or those who are so ignorant they imagine that love and social issues have nothing to do with each other, nay that the personal is not also political” (Azodo, 1999: xvii). In fact, by the opening pages of the novel even the most inattentive reader can perceive that it is not just another novel about the loves and disillusionments that surround the relationship between a man and a woman. There are some clues that lead us to foresee something much deeper and complex that aims at the denouncement and acknowledgement of women’s positioning in familiar and societal environments and consequently to an awareness of the forms of oppression they have to go through.

Vincent O Odamtten argues that *Changes: A Love Story* “seeks to develop our understanding of the real problems that arise in personal relationships always-and-already subject to the political and ideological pressures of a particular historical moment” (Odamtten, 1994: 161). Considering that the political is personal and the personal is political, the personal basis of the novel *Changes* leads us to a political perspective of the events. The roles within the familial milieu and within society, the effects of these roles in women’s lives, the influence of tradition and modernity in the lives of the African women, may all be perceived in the characters’ actions and reactions to everything and everyone that surrounds them. In fact, the personal becomes political, as it is the result of the influence of the second over the first. Women’s conflicts, crises and their need for change must be analysed through an attentive perspective that takes into account all these and other facts and circumstances that condition women’s movements at home, at work, and

in the field of interpersonal relationships. Linda Imray and Audrey Middleton argue that “The opposition between private and public, then, is not seen as opposed activity, but rather in terms of power relationships which are thrown into sharp relief by rituals that mark these boundaries” (Imray, Middleton, 2002: 155) and thus these become the two sides of the same reality that cannot be separated.

Aidoo’s female characters are often radical figures in terms of social, political and economic issues who frequently rebel against the institutional structures offering new alternative modes of living needed because of the also new characteristics of the African landscape and thus in *Changes* the female characters are presented as intelligent, working and educated women. The three most important women characters of the novel, Esi, Fusena and Opokuya, are, although radically different among themselves, at a first glance, placed in an advantageous situation due to their Western education, when compared to the African women who do not get any type of education at all. However, throughout the novel their roles as mothers, wives and daughters will place them in determined situations that clearly constrain their movements. Even though “Whereas Opokuya and Esi remain active questioners and actors in the changing landscape of sexual and personal relationships, Fusena remains a question mark – the silenced reminder that oppression remains in different corners of female society” (McWilliams, 1999: 352), these women are aware of their situation but their attitude towards the state of things is completely different from the silenced and expected one. Women have always been placed at the bottom of the institutionalised power hierarchies and education seems to be the only way out for them to escape the inevitable fate of the doomed and so these female characters, especially Esi, do not see themselves as passive victims but as agents

of change. By presenting educated female characters Aidoo attempts to demonstrate that even though education is the only possible escape from their actual state of things it sometimes turns into a burden difficult to carry for it traps women within the boundaries of tradition and modernity, past and present.

The main character of the novel *Changes: A Love Story*, Esi, is a free and emancipated professional woman who becomes the symbol of the new professional women, and she is educated and financially independent and so “Esi could be seen as the stereotypical Westernised professional West African woman” (McWilliams, 1999: 347). This portrait, that subverts the commonly known representation of African women as non-educated and totally dependent on men both physically and psychologically, aims at the demystification and renewal of previous concepts since Aidoo considers that

The image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tab. She is hungry, and so are her children. In fact, it has become a cliché of Western photojournalism that the African woman is old beyond her years; she is half-naked; her drooped and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around the faces of her children; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand (quoted in Collins, 2000: 241)

Today’s African world is crowded with new types of women radically different from this image and Aidoo feels the need to clarify and offer these new perspectives that, to a certain extent, are not properly known by the common reader and that cause new types of freedom but also new types of oppression. However, to clearly understand the importance

of Esi's character one must deeply analyse the circumstances that surround Esi's life and that contribute and condition her movements and decisions.

Unexpectedly, in the novel's first pages the reader is confronted with a rape scene that occurs between the main character Esi and Oko, her husband. Certainly the reader wouldn't expect a love story to open in such a way and this may be understood as the second attempt to call the reader's attention to the fact that this novel may not follow some of the "rules" a novel usually does. Vincent O. Odamtten argues that "The rape is important, but it should not be confused with the narrative's central concerns; it is a symptom of much more fundamental personal, social, and political dislocations" (Odamtten, 1994: 165). In fact, the subject of marital rape is not largely discussed in the novel even though it is the root of almost everything that happens since even Esi admits that "just as earthquakes and floods become landmarks in the history of nations, the morning when Oko jumped on Esi became a landmark in their relationship: referred to thereafter by both of them as 'That morning'" (Eke, 1999: 69). Rape is the basis that leads to a more ambivalent debate about the concept of power within gender relations. However, before making further considerations on rape and on its importance to the development of the whole novel one must take into account that women's themes that include women's sexuality haven't been largely developed not only because of their complexities but also because of the traditional preconceptions involving women's intimate lives. Sally McWilliams argues that "Like their sister and daughter writers of the African Diaspora, African women writers such as Aidoo are cautious in their attempts to delve into the sexual waters for fear of reinscribing stereotypes that misrepresent the complexities of African women's subjectivities and lives" (McWilliams, 1999: 335) and thus

Aidoo only offers a glimpse of this problematic that allows a deeper understanding and analysis of the theme as it is the result of a convergence of factors and as it causes a number of consequences, as well.

The taking of Esi's body by her husband brings into question a concept that is not known in the Ghanaian language: "marital rape", "That what she had gone through with Oko had been marital rape. 'Marital rape?!' She began to laugh rather uncontrollably, and managed to stop herself only when it occurred to her that anyone coming up upon her that minute would think she had lost her mind, which would not have been too far from the truth" (Aidoo, 1991: 11). After what had happened Esi's immediate thoughts were centred on the lack of a word or expression for the verbalization of a crime that officially doesn't exist in this specific context. The difficulty in naming the incident as rape and marital rape may be connected with Aidoo's innovative attempt to deal with an issue that hasn't been largely developed but also with the awareness that in that precise context such a crime wouldn't be considered for there doesn't even exist a word or expression to define it, according to Bola Mankanjuola, "Aidoo tentatively raises the issue ... But never dwells on the subject. It is as both Esi and the author realize that in an African society there could not possibly be an 'indigenous word or phrase for it'" (quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1999: 291). On the other hand, this lack of ability to name the incident as rape may also be seen as a proof to the audience that Esi, in spite of being an educated woman, was not just being influenced by feminist ideas imported by Western feminists. Esi's reaction by concentrating on the lack of a word or expression for what had happened goes further and she dreams about her presentation of a paper on "The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment" but at the same time she is criticised by an overwhelmingly

male audience of importing feminist ideas, “What is burying us now are all these imported feminist ideas”(Aidoo, 1991: 11). By referring to this Aidoo is both criticising those who accuse African women writers of importing white feminist ideas and at the same time asserting the idea that African women are not to be silenced and that they do not need the Western white women’s protectionism, “we African women are perfectly capable of making up our minds and speaking for ourselves” (Aidoo in McWilliams, 1999: 333). Having to face something that theoretically doesn’t exist makes Esi feel rather odd and lost and she uncontrollably starts to laugh over not knowing exactly how to act for she only feels disorientation and lack of ability to deal with the situation. One might question why didn’t the concept exist? The concept of marital rape is a recent one for, in Esi’s words, “Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right” (Aidoo, 1991: 12). In fact, marital rape is a crime not easily understood as such until only a short time ago and not only in the African context but worldwide. During the last few decades the definition of marital rape has developed but, for example, until very recently the California Penal Code, for example, still defined rape as “an act of sexual intercourse accomplished with a person not the spouse of the perpetrator” (Harris, 1996: 54), not recognising non-consensual sex between spouses as a crime. However, in 1979, and only in 1979, a new section was added to this law in order to recognise the crime of spousal rape even though it continues to be considered a less serious crime than rape when perpetrated against other person other than that of one’s spouse.

Before the rape scene the reader is already aware that Oko is determined to rape Esi for a certain number of reasons. This premonition may function as a device to convince the reader of Oko’s intentions and at the same time to give the reader hope that

he, after raping her mentally, wouldn't rape her physically. There are several factors that may have caused Oko's urgent need to prove his masculinity and domination over Esi's self. Oko resented Esi's use of birth control techniques and at the same time he felt humiliated over having to fight against Esi's career for her love and attention, "But to have to fight with your woman's career for her attention is not only new in the history of the world, but completely humiliating" (Aidoo, 1991: 70). Esi is a modern woman who does not conform to the traditional roles of mother and wife, she does not want to have a second child, against her family, Oko's family's and society's curses, and she does not see motherhood as a synonym for womanhood, as her grandmother does, "You have already got your daughter. You don't even have to prove you are a woman to any man old or new" (Aidoo, 1991: 106). Besides this Esi has a successful career, she is economically independent, she even earns more than Oko does, and thus he feels he is a "less man because he does not control either the sexual politics of his married life or his wife's career" (McWilliams, 1999: 348). Oko is also ashamed because of his friends' remarks "They think I'm not behaving like a man" (Aidoo, 1991: 8) and all these circumstances make Oko resent "Esi and women like her for not conforming to the traditional roles of woman as wife and mother and thus, attempts to dominate her to assert his masculine superiority" (4). He realises he has to prove his masculinity both to himself and to Esi for he feels shame and frustration over not being able to exercise power as he would be expected to. Due to his education he saw his role within the structure of marriage diminished or even erased. In her landmark *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks argues that

The structure of marriage in patriarchal society is based on a system of exchange, one in which men are traditionally taught to provide economically for women and children in exchange for sexual, housekeeping, and nurturing services. The argument that black men have been emasculated because they were not always able to assume the patriarchal role of provider is based on the assumption that black men feel that they should provide for their families and therefore feel unmanned or guilty if they cannot do so (hooks, 1981: 76)

and this may clarify Oko's need for emasculation and ended up making him act according to what would be expected, to prove his masculinity. The process of education can be analysed here since there is a clear evidence that Oko wasn't prepared to deal with this new situation that placed him together with an educated woman who knows exactly what she wants and who is not interested in allowing men to interfere with her desires and expectations for "Esi clearly is one of these women who seem to know what they want out of this life and what she seems to want doesn't necessarily coincide with what her husband wants for her or what society thinks a woman should have" (4). The assertion of his masculinity started with the demand for something that was his by right: the access to Esi's body. Since Esi was not interested in providing the sexual services Oko was demanding he felt the need to use his last resource, in order to prove his role, through the use of violence and aggression. The use of violence is the ultimate solution for Oko, who wanted to give their marriage a second chance, just as it seems to be to many men who nowadays cannot prove their masculinity through any other means, "Most men in patriarchal society, though fanatically committed to male dominance, like to think that they will not use brutality to oppress women. Yet at very young ages male children are



socialized to regard females as their enemy and as a threat to their masculine status and power – a threat, however, they can conquer through violence” (hooks, 1981: 107). The access to Esi’s sexuality ends up being not only an attempt to control her body but also an attempt to control her individuality since women like Esi can be perceived by men as a menace to their power and dominance.

Even though the words rape and marital rape do not exist in the Ghanaian vocabulary both Oko and Esi know that it had occurred. Both Oko and Esi knew what had happened and from the moment of the rape on, it is going to be used by both for different reasons because “The incident of marital rape discloses the debilitating effects of static gender roles for both men and women against the field of heterosexual politics that exceed the confines of the bedroom walls” (McWilliams, 1999: 349). Through rape, Oko accomplishes his need for gender discrimination and for Esi it serves as a catalyst that leads her to question the sexual politics of her society for she understands that “Rape bears a direct relationship to all of the existing power structures in a given society. This relationship is not a simple, mechanical one, but rather involves complex structures reflecting the interconnectedness of the race, gender, and class oppression that characterize society” (Davis, 1989: 47). The institution of marriage has always been allied to the unconditional access to the woman’s body and thus Esi asks for divorce using the rape incident to justify her decision, “Events of That Morning might have outraged her, but it could not be the whole story. She was just using it. This was the point from which he had begun to feel genuinely baffled” (Aidoo, 1991: 69). To ask for divorce in the African atmosphere is not something usual but Esi sees it as the only way to deal with the situation and by doing this she may have become “the first African heroine to seek divorce

from husband for marital rape, a crime socially perceived as the husband's claim to his property rights" (Uwakweh, 1999: 365). Esi challenges patriarchy both by naming what occurred as rape and by choosing divorce as the solution for the growing awareness that both her husband and society exactly know what is expected from men and women although she is not willing to surrender and to accept this situation. Esi prefers to take the risk of being marginalized than to submit to this type of gender oppression and part of the conflict comes out of that.

However, in the same way Esi challenges patriarchy by asking for divorce using rape as her weapon, Esi ironically seems to co-operate with patriarchy when she chooses the traditional structure of polygamy in her search for a new model of existence that must be found for the new professional female African woman. When Ali asked Esi to marry him, Esi immediately perceived that even though the invitation was quite thrilling it would cause her some problems, "However, she knew that by marriage he also meant her becoming his second wife. Although the idea fascinated her no end, she could sense that it meant complications" (Aidoo, 1991: 86). But after a failed marriage Esi was decided to attempt to find a new location for female autonomy by choosing an alternative way of living by "trying to create for herself a space in which her sexual desires, her need for companionship, her counter need for freedom and her career ambitions can all coexist" (McWilliams, 1999: 354). Polygamy is a traditional sexist institution that goes against social and familiar expectations for the educated African elite and thus one wouldn't expect Esi, a professional modern woman, to get herself involved in this type of relationship. By placing her main character within this institution, Aidoo allows a new insight into this traditional institution since maybe for the first time a career woman sees

herself in this type of situation. Ironically, Esi who had defied and questioned tradition when she asked for divorce was now defying and questioning modernity and what would be considered women's achievements since now polygamy wasn't seen as a model of existence for women anymore, especially educated women. Polygamy is an issue that is raised for it is a form of women's oppression and exploitation even though it is seen by some authors, like Buchi Emecheta, as something that can clearly benefit women, even if she is educated, "polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated" (quoted in Uwakweh, 1999: 368). If in the past this institution was commonly accepted there seems to be an inadequacy between polygamy and today's world seen in the non-acceptance of this type of marriage by Esi's mother when Opokuya says "I would have thought a woman like your mother who still lives in the village would have understood" and Esi answers "That's what I had also thought. But quite clearly we were all wrong. My mother thinks that with all the education I've had, I should have everything better than she has had" (Aidoo, 1991: 95). Esi has to go through several difficulties when involved in her polygamous marriage and these difficulties are used to serve the disguised critique that is made of this institution. Esi's psychological breakdown, that seems to be a consequence of Ali's absence, makes Esi take sleeping pills, once considered by her as a sign of weakness, is one of the strategies that is used to reinforce and strengthen this critique. Some time after their marriage Esi starts to understand that polygamy is not a solution to her search for alternative ways of living for the professional woman since jealousy, the sense of abandonment, and the inability to make her head and heart cope with each other start to dominate her feelings and her own self. Aidoo doesn't clearly disapprove of polygamy but she recognises that such an institution can hardly

survive and succeed because of the difficulty or even impossibility in separating heart and mind

Esi herself overlooked the fact that the heart has a way of going in its own way without listening to the head. And so, after she had agreed to marry Ali and she suspected that Ali was running after some third woman then she became unhappy. And although she thought it was going to be good for her to be a second wife without her considering the first wife, she realised that it hurts to think that she would now have to share Ali with another woman who was not even his first wife. So I think that you can survive being a second wife if you think you can hold your heart in check and not mind, sharing the man you love and I don't think it's possible (4)

According to the author, a polygamous marriage thus cannot succeed in today's world because like marriage itself polygamy is about repression and lack of freedom and independence that cannot be articulated with African women's needs nowadays.

Both marriage and polygamy are gender institutions that are used to reinforce women's subjection, repression and exploitation and this position is demonstrated by Nana's words,

My lady Silk, remember a man always gained in stature through any way he chose to associate with a woman (...) a woman has always been diminished in her association with a man (...) My lady Silk, it was not a question of this type of marriage or that type of marriage (...) it was just being wife. It is being a woman (...) When we were young we were told that people who were condemned to death were granted any wish on the eve of their execution (...) Anyhow, a young woman on her

wedding day was something like that. She was made much of, because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been (Aidoo, 1991: 109 - 110).

The death of the woman as the self is the way Aidoo manages to picture all types of marriage through the voice of Nana because woman ceases to exist as a self-determining person and a sense of loss starts to dominate her being, "Therefore, in the novel, Aidoo challenges the continual loss of women's public space through the personal act of love and the community act of marriage" (Wilentz, 1999: 275). This new type of existence, characterised by a sense of lack, may also be seen by Esi's remarks when Ali gives her an engagement ring. Esi shows indignation and surprise when Ali gives her the ring because she feels that the ring is the materialization of something that proves she is the property of somebody else, a social proof used in men's favour. She understands it as a sign that her existence as an individual is about to end for she will now be Ali's wife, and property, and not Esi. Opokuya, Esi's best friend, perceives Esi's death as a self in her eyes, "But Opokuya was to notice any time they met over the next few months that the slightly lost look never left her friend's eyes" (Aidoo, 1991: 140), a lost look that represented Esi's loss of identity as a woman. In *The Future of Marriage*, Jessie Bernard argues that there are "two marriages ... in every marital union, his and hers" (Bernard, 2002: 207) and that "The psychological costs of marriage, in brief, seem to be considerably greater for wives than for husbands and the benefits considerably fewer" (Bernard, 2002: 210), and this confirms Esi's mother's knowledge and awareness that women's association with men through marriage will always be diminishing for women, "Our people have said that for any marriage to work one party has to be a fool. And they really mean the woman, no? Naturally" (Aidoo, 1991: 49). This necessity for a fool in each

marriage again proves Esi's inability to cope with this institution since as a modern professional woman Esi is not at ease with or willing to subject herself to play this role.

By presenting two types of marriages in the contemporary African landscape and at the same time two attempts to locate the modern African woman in the context of personal relationships, Aidoo aims at the denouncement of economically free and educated African women's dilemmas. Aidoo uses Esi to show that African women can enjoy independence and freedom from their traditional roles as wife and mother but, on the other hand, there seems to be an insistence on the fact that only the economically free woman can do so. This attitude is clearly expressed in Nana's words "Leave one man, marry another. Esi, you can. You have got your job. The government gives you a house. You have got your car. You have already got your daughter. You don't even have to prove you are a woman to any man, old or new" (Aidoo, 1991: 109). This reference is curious because most traditional Ghanaian societies were matrilineal and before colonization women had considerably more social and economic autonomy than in other parts of the world and their women were expected to be financially independent even when married but colonization disrupted this tradition. There seems to have been a non-innocent approach to the introduction of some colonial rules that ended up reinforcing patriarchy. Aidoo is conscious of the double quarrel African women have to fight both against men and against the new types of discrimination brought by colonialism, "I'm not saying at all that sexism was introduced into Africa by colonial men (...) Ours have a double quarrel. Not only as Africans, but also as women. Colonized by the colonizer, then by our men with their new power" (quoted in Azodo, 1999: xvi). Esi is also aware that African men have been influenced and empowered by Western values when Ali almost forces her to wear

an engagement ring, “At that, Esi just threw her head and laughed and laughed – at the insolence of the modern African male. Tears were streaming down her face” (Aidoo, 1991: 91). Esi cries because she is defeated and because she understands that even the most traditional institutions are now moulded according to the colonizers’ world.

Another aspect that seems to be essential for women’s freedom and independence is education, confirming a “West African adage that says, ‘if you educate an individual, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation’. This concept, tied to the elaborate structure of a family compound in West Africa, attests to the predominance of woman’s position as a political being in both family and community life” (Wilentz, 1999: 267). However, throughout the novel the reader comes to the conclusion that even though education is fundamental for women it can also be a means of entrapment since the existence of Western educated African females often causes a confusion of identity similar to the confusion that is felt in Esi’s country, “Esi is forced to question her education, the language of that ‘education’ and the (apparent) alienated hybrid she seems to have become” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1999: 293). As a modern Western educated woman Esi sees herself fighting for a place in the new African landscape and trying to assert African women’s new status as self-determining and independent spirits in the search for a self-fulfilling model of existence. In her almost desperate search for new models of existence, Esi’s sense of dislocation and displacement ends up making her act sometimes without pondering the situations that cause her fall into the trap she is trying to run away from, “we have an educated woman who should know better how to assert herself with her male colleagues and not fall into the trap of predetermined gender roles / hierarchies that construct and position women at the bottom of power structures, but who,

(un)consciously, just does that” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1999: 284). In fact, one can perceive that the freedom enjoyed by Esi, and other professional African women, is only apparent and disguises many types of oppression and exploitation women still have to go through: “It was a man’s world. You only survived if you knew how to live in it as a woman. What shocked the older women though, was obviously how little had changed for their daughters – school and all!” (Aidoo, 1991: 107). It seems that despite the formal education Esi has had, the sexual politics between men and women is still a dominant issue that governs today’s world as it did for Esi’s ancestors, thus demonstrating Nancy Chodorow’s statements: “there is a sense in which this schooling is pseudo-training. It is not meant to interfere with the much more important training to be ‘feminine’ and a wife and mother, which is embedded in the girl’s unconscious development and which her mother teaches her in a family context where she is clearly the salient parent” (Chodorow, 1989: 55).

Aidoo is conscious that education is the sole means that may lead to the creation of new opportunities for women but at the same time she realises that this process is very complex and elaborate and that neither men nor women are yet prepared for the changes that are needed because “English, the language of power, assimilated and imposed a condition of alienation on those educated in the colonizer’s language, a condition that Aidoo says has ‘wreaked havoc’ in the minds of modern African women and thus threatens and continues to intrude in and shape gender relations between contemporary, Western educated, African men and women” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1999: 290). *Changes: A Love Story*, is precisely about the necessary changes that both women and the country are anxious for and about the means that are needed to achieve them. If education can be the process through which change can be attained, it can also be the cause of serious



complications due to the necessary alliance between tradition and modernity, past and present, repression and freedom that has cost both Esi's and the country's damage, pain and suffering, "All this was too high price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and the country now was in" (Aidoo, 1991: 114). The process of change is inevitably something painful, difficult and long that includes going backward and forward, gains and losses, and that requires a deep commitment and resistance. The analogy between Esi's story and the country's history is something that cannot escape our analysis not only because literary works frequently reflect the problems of the society which give birth to them but also because these problems can be disguised by apparent individual stories since in Stephen Slemon's words post colonial texts "reinstate the sphere of the political as paramount over the individual or private" (Rooney, 1991: 223).

The sentimental narrative suggested by the novel's subtitle "A Love Story" ends up being an irony that is constant throughout the text not only because of the absence of the expected "happy ending" but also because of the series of incidents that seem to separate Esi from happiness, such as the incident of marital rape, the divorce from Oko, the involvement in a polygamous marriage, the separation from Ali, and ultimately the growing awareness of the lack of solutions for the modern African women. The processes of tradition and transition affect Esi's life the same way the processes of decolonisation still affect the African world. *Changes: A Love Story* is a novel that presents rape as the gear that puts in motion the debate around a series of oppressions contemporary African women have to go through at the same time as it denounces the on-going rape and domination of Africa by the West. Even though rape, one must admit, is not exhaustively

developed and paid attention to, it is certainly the starting point that confirms Chris Dunton's statement that argues that these and other issues can be used to demonstrate "a problematic use of metaphor in relating women's experience to the practice of an oppressive nation – State, and so on" (Dunton, 2000: 1 – 2). In fact, this image of personal rape can be used as a metaphor for the rape of the nation, of its culture and of its tradition because of the constant dilemmas Esi sees herself into. C.L. Innes thus argues that Aidoo's major worries are determined "not to dissociate the personal and the political [as they] become the central concerns of Aidoo's novels" (quoted in Booker, 1998: 138). The need for change is thus essential for development both within the limits of the personal and political spheres. Aidoo is aware of women's and of Africans' non-privileged statuses and positioning in society and in the world, so thus she tries to demonstrate some of the possible responses to the challenges of contemporary African women and of Africans in general at the same time as she denounces the combination of forces that have contributed to this situation. On the other hand, there seems to be a sort of rebellion against oppressive institutional structures in an attempt to represent "the search for a better relationship between Africa and the Diaspora, which she believes will constitute the sole panacea for a worthy place in the world community" (Azodo, 1999: xx). Since the survival of the nation is deeply connected with the liberation and progress of its women, the novel concentrates on the progresses and regresses of a woman whose intimate experiences must be taken into account in relation to issues of national development. Esi's split personality in the end is a representation of the country's instability and "The clash of cultures that colonialism invariably provoked, rather than producing a neat bifurcation between coloniser and colonised, encouraged the formation of new cultural

hybrids" (Papastergiades, 2000: 264), the result of the conflicts of interest between the parts and processes of identity.

Esi's searches for alternative lifestyles in order to resolve the conflicts that arise between a woman's marital and mothering role and a woman's career, can be an image of the country's search for its assertion as a self-fulfilling independent and free nation. Ironically, and in spite of the title and of the set of changes that proliferate throughout the novel and in spite of the necessary changes that are still needed, the novel ends up in stasis. Esi is still looking for an alternative lifestyle, seen in her involvement with Kubi, Opokuya's husband, that cannot include a return to tradition, in the same way as the country is still trying to find its place "The ending of the novel leaves these questions of what values and traditions to pass on unresolved for Esi and her nation" (Wilentz, 1999: 277). In the end, the disillusionment that characterises Esi as an individual can be seen as the disillusionment that characterises the country's individuality, a feeling expressed through the use of a warning to those who attempt to find alternatives. *Changes: A Love Story* ends in a moment of crisis and Esi is faced with no alternatives, no escape from the confusion she now is.

Do I think it must always be so [that women must be sacrificed by men]?

Certainly not. It can be changed. It can be better. Life on this earth needs not always some humans being gods and others being sacrificial animals. Indeed, that can be changed. But it would take so much. No, not time. There has always been enough time for anything anyone really wanted to do. What it would take is a lot of thinking and a great deal of doing. But one wonders whether we are prepared to tire our minds

and our bodies that much. Are we human beings even prepared to try? (Aidoo, 1991: 111)

This account is rather disturbing and it can be understood as an attempt to recognize that the heterosexual system is still using female submission and suffering to support male dominance as the Europeans are still using Africans' submission and suffering, "We Africans have allowed ourselves to be regularly sacrificed by the egos of the Europeans, no?" (Aidoo, 1991: 110). At the same time it is also a call for women's and men's action as agents of change, not only in terms of the women's but also the country's liberation in order to stop the physical and psychological rapes that infect the African landscape.



## Conclusion



The structures of power are deeply connected with the hierarchical relationships between the public and the private spheres that usually associate men with the dominant public sphere and women with the dominated private one. This hierarchy is usually perceived as something natural for it is inculcated in almost all traditions of every country and nation, regardless of time or place. The existence of a male-dominated world is thus usually perceived as something natural since every role within a certain society is largely pre-determined and a turn from “natural” tendencies is something that requires a wider and deeper change that would affect everybody. Patriarchy is thus the societal structure that has been exercising its power throughout time and that has continually been aiming at the exercise of authority and power over the so-called weakest: women. This control of women’s lives seems to be common to every culture, race and class and has seen its power being reinforced through the powerful structures of tradition, education, religion, culture, and literature, among others.

The growing awareness of this state of things has created the need to subvert this tendency or at least to minimize its consequences in women’s lives and thus throughout the last few decades one has seen the proliferation of groups of women who try to resist and fight against the control that is exercised upon them. Through various means, women have united in order to assert their value, their independence, their self-determining character, their ability to take decisions and, consequently, to surpass the “silence” they



had been confined to. These attempts to achieve a different status in society have also been oriented towards a greater recognition of women's ability to express themselves both as women and as thinkers who are able to show their own representations of the world through the use of literature as a device that may lead to change. The increase in the number of writings by women has thus multiplied and reinforced the power of women's voice after centuries of silence. However, the need for a sensitive interpretation is required so that they are not misunderstood, misjudged or misanalysed.

Besides this, one must not forget the significant differences among women themselves that are a result of several factors such as class but especially race. In fact, race is an integral part of the "double-jeopardy" black women have had to fight against for they not only had to assert their existence as gendered subjects but they also had to go through a fervent struggle against the racial discrimination exercised upon them.

The contact between Western and African cultures and peoples has indubitably caused a clash as far as traditions, religions, cultures, habits, customs, languages and creeds are concerned. The Western assertion of power and their belief in their duty to civilize the African peoples through the use of force has caused dramatic changes in the African landscape in all aspects of its existence. Colonialism has thus introduced to Africa new ways of thinking and new methods of exercising power that ended up reinforcing the already existent gender stratification. Black men's subjugation by the white Europeans may thus be seen as an analogy for white women's subjugation by white males and this subjugation is done through various ways that include not only psychological but also physical coercive means. The psychological means of persuasion are those that are

rooted in our traditions and these are maintained through the process of education that is also responsible for the maintenance of physical coercion.

Taking into account that literature can be used as a device that aims at a change of the state of things, African women's texts are a fertile soil where we can find the various forms of oppression, subjugation and exploitation African women have gone and may be going through. However, these can also be seen as representative of not only African women but also African males' situation as well. All the stories are produced in determined social contexts and they may originate various types of analysis that can range from anthropology, psychology, history, psychoanalysis, and others. However, and in spite of the importance of the contexts in which stories are produced, read and understood and in spite of their importance as agents of change, one must bear in mind the fact that they reflect the power structures that characterize the world, for "stories live in this flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story under the conditions of one's choosing, is part of the political process" (Plummer, 1995: 26). The modern world is thus crowded with sexual stories that concentrate on the power of their metaphors and that are used to bring together the personal / private spheres and the political / public ones. Through the use of stories that deal with the private and personal domains it is possible to conclude that the use of rape aims at the denouncing of power and violence inflicted on the weakest. The power of the words is conveyed by these stories of rape and ends up being a representation of sexuality as a means to control individuals.

Rape is presented as a metaphor for the colonial relations as it is a clear manifestation of the discourse of power that characterises both patriarchy and colonialism.

These texts allow us an insight into the conflicting arenas of feminism and colonialism that are put together in order to draw “an analogy between male – female relationships and those of the imperial power and the colony” (Kershner, 1997: 89). These three women’s texts attempt to disrupt both the patriarchal “logos” and the colonial / postcolonial influences that still repress the lives of women socially, culturally and politically.

The choice of a theme that seems to be inherently connected with women’s issues has thus allowed both a reflection upon the structures of power within certain societies and an insight into historical events that lead to another understanding of these structures. Only bearing in mind the concepts that the private is public and the personal is political is it possible to establish a connection that enables us to understand the ambivalence and depth of the themes that are debated in the selected novels. By the use of different techniques the authors manage to deal with an apparently private concern that aims at a much broader discussion. Buchi Emecheta’s *The Rape of Shavi* seems to be the novel that more clearly presents rape as an analogy for the cultural and psychological rape Africa has gone through in the hands of its invaders. There is a quite straightforward relationship between Ayoko’s rape and the subsequent despoilment of the entire Shavian community that represents and ends up denouncing the rape of the African countries by the European. The focus on interracial rape may thus be also a symptom for the rape of an entire race by another who claimed its superiority and who did not take into account the means to achieve and assert it. In *The Rape of Sita* however, this relationship is not so clear even though there are several clues that may lead us to foresee Sita’s rape as a metaphor for the rape of an entire people. Sita appropriates the concept of rape and she becomes the means through which it is possible to draw the connections between sexism

and colonialism that function as allies. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* presents a completely different approach to the theme since rape is only the starting point that allows a different insight into the theme of gender differentiation and subjugation. This differentiation can and must however be analysed not only in terms of gender but also as a consequence of the process of colonization. Even though the three novels offer different insights into the theme of rape they can all be analysed through both feminist and postcolonialist perspectives. The three novels raise questions that are deeply connected with the power structures that crowd and rule the contexts in which they are inserted and at the same time they provide a variety of analyses for they present, together with the theme of rape, a wide range of themes. Marriage, polygamy, psychological breakdown, clitoridectomy, education, tradition and modernity, race, class and gender differentiation, hybridity, are just some examples of the concepts that are used in order to debunk, expose and denounce the power differentiation that still inhabits today's world. The main characters of the three chosen stories are what could be called privileged women for they do not belong to the average due to their social position, their professional status and their familial environment. Nonetheless, they somehow have to go through the experience of power differentiation, hierarchy and patterns of domination that characterise their societies and worlds and this ends up functioning as a representation of power as something that respects neither gender, race or class. These three postcolonial feminist novels centred on the highly sensitive theme of rape are thus the result of a convergence of factors and they carry not only a denouncing weight but also a didactic message oriented towards the need to change the existing power structures whatever their nature might be.



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